ブレイブルー2 カラミティトリガー〈下〉

原案・監修：森利道
（アークシステムワークス）
著：駒尾真子

ドラゴンブック

"You are..." Noel's voice shook as she stared at the girl who emerged from the cauldron.

"Tsuhahaha! Come on! Get more serious. Otherwise… it wouldn't be any fun!" Jin shouted in excitement as he swung his sword.

"Type Zero restraining engine released… Dimensional interference imaginary number forming. Tsukuyomi Unit, activate!"

BLAZBLUE-Blazblue 2

Calamity Trigger (Part 2)

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Fujimi Dragon Book

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A certain beginning

Every time a world ends, the wheel turns.

Every time a world begins, the Azure turns. The turning, turning wheel of Azure fate spins, weaving an unending god's dream.

And the Azure finds a new world. Spinning a certain beginning.

March 1, 2192 - Night

It's burning.

In the middle of a wide grassland, a quiet, old, and beautiful church stands against a deep forest backdrop.

Its white walls, its pointed roof, its wooden door, its old window frames. Engulfed in dancing flames, swirling up roaring sparks... it was burning.

For the boy, it was the only home. There was a family there. There was a life. There was a caring sister, a crybaby younger brother, and a troublesome younger sister.

There were petty quarrels, annoying cries, scolding voices, and troublesome worries. There were sweet slumbers, voices calling his name, the light of the fireplace, and gentle hands. All the joy was there.

It was a small world. But it was a very important one, so important that he didn't even realize it. Everything was there.

But everything is in flames. With a roar like the death cry of a terrifying demon beast, one after another, the roofs collapse and fall.

Ah, that was where the dining table was. On the simple wooden table, there were white flowers that his sister had picked in the forest. The sister's jam was delicious. Just the other day, he had fixed his brother's broken chair.

Just a few hours ago, the warmth that he had felt at noon would no longer be... never again. Never.

"Don't…"

The flames of the burning church made two figures in the distance appear in his vision. One was a lanky, shadow-like man. The other was a young boy. The boy walking, led by the shadow, was his younger brother. The shadow was carrying his younger sister on his shoulder.

"Wait....."

He just lay powerlessly on the grass. His right arm was gone. There was a deep stab wound from a sword in his back, and every time he squeezed out a hoarse voice, his clothes were dyed heavily red.

"Wait... don't...!"

Burning.

As he listened to the sound of the church collapsing, his stomach was burning. His whole body seemed to be burning with anger.

But even stronger than that was a terribly miserable feeling of powerlessness.

He couldn't do anything.

He fell helplessly on the ground without being able to do anything.

And he lost everything.

The injuries he sustained were so deep they'd eventually take his life. He couldn't take back what was stolen…

The footsteps on the grassland were growing distant. The voice didn't reach. They didn't even turn around. Nobody looked. There was nothing.

(Wait... this- this isn't a secret talk... give it back... give it back! My brother, my sister, the sister, the church, everything, everything... give it back!)

The scream couldn't even drown out the sound of the exploding sparks, and only turned into a powerless, trembling breath.

The empty, cloudy vision became heavy, dark, and hazy... as if washing away all the pain, suffering, hope, and peace, a cold rain began to fall.

The destiny guided on the appointed day burned out, and eventually rain fell on the burned field. The boy who lost his arm fell to the ground, and everything was lost from him.

It was a passing point that had been repeated countless times, and had been repeated countless times.

The Wheel of Fortune.

And the Azure turns the last wheel.

Some month, some day in 2194 - time unknown

The region had been in the midst of civil war for several years.

The Ikaruga Civil War.

That was the name given to the conflict, a struggle in which the Ikaruga Federation raised its banner in opposition of the methods of the Novus Orbis Librarium, which governed the world. The chaotic battle continued, with no end in sight.

While turning a blind eye to such foul warfare, as if to avert their eyes from the folly of the outside world, research and experimentation were being repeated day and night in a laboratory established deep beneath the 5th Hierarchical City of Ibukido.

In a room covered with cold metal walls and filled with cold air, the instruments, tightly packed and narrow, lit many cold lamps to signal some kind of state.

A white-coated man was recording it on the computer, his expression so cold that it was expressionless, and the white-coated men standing behind him were also cold.

But what drifts around them is not coldness. It is a slight tension.

An important experiment is scheduled for the next day. Right now, it's the preparation for that, and the entire research institute is a little more nervously tense than usual.

"...Is it really okay?"

"No problem. The structure is the same for both the eleventh and twelfth bodies."

"The eleventh body can't be used for the experiment in the first place. We've used it extensively in tests up until now. We can't afford to ruin this important experiment by using damaged materials."

Important experiment. Everyone understood and groaned at those words, as if to say it can't be helped.

"What do we do with the eleventh body?"

"There's no point in leaving it here. It will also get in the way of carrying in the twelfth body..."

One of the white-coated men glanced towards the back of the room. Beyond that, there were cylindrical cases connected to countless cables. The cases, made of a material that was as transparent as glass, but far more robust, were filled with a slightly bluish liquid, and in them, a girl, also connected to countless cables, floated as if asleep.

On her collarbone, which was exposed without ceremony in place of clothes, with inorganic devices attached to various parts of her body, there was an engraving of "eleven."

There was no sign of will in her floating figure, and she was so listless that it was doubtful whether she was even alive. The figure, an already slender girl, also looked somewhat haggard... If viewed with emotions that were out of place for the setting, it would appear painful to anyone's eyes.

But this is a place where sentiment is unnecessary. It is a place where everything is shaped by cold, rigorous numbers and calculations.

The researcher who looked at her also looked at the girl in the case without a trace of emotion, and continued without hesitation in the tone of his eyes.

"There's no other use for it. Destroy it."

"No objections there."

"But if we destroy it, it's going to be a hassle. We have to dispose of it without the outside world knowing. Should we just throw it in the Boundary?"

"Hey, don't be rash. What if doing that affects tomorrow's experiment?"

"Just put it somewhere appropriate, and dispose of it with the waste when it's forgotten. More than that, we're concerned about tomorrow."

The results of the preparations that have been underway for a long time should take priority over the disposal method of a used doll. It was an all too natural reason.

Everyone turns their eyes and consciousness away from the girl in the case, as if they have lost interest.

"By the way, how is Relius Clover? Have you been in touch?"

"No, not at all. We contacted him about the date of the experiment several times. And yet, I can't get in touch..."

"We can proceed without him. The procedures and methods have been confirmed with him many times before. The lack of contact means that he's leaving tomorrow's matter to us."

"We appreciate him providing the eleventh and twelfth bodies to our Seventh Agency, but that doesn't mean we have to accommodate his needs."

"Indeed."

"Ah, indeed."

The men nodded.

"Then we'll withdraw the eleventh body today and carry in the twelfth body tomorrow as planned."

At the words spoken by one of the men, the men moved their heads in order once again.

In the back of the room, the hair of the girl floating in the liquid shimmered and swayed heavily, illuminated by the bare minimum of light needed to illuminate the research room.

But no one saw it.

The connection between the instruments and the case was severed for removal. The data was sufficient. There was no need to keep "11" connected any longer.

The work proceeded without delay.

There were no oversights in the preparations, and no flaws in the equipment. No abnormalities were seen in the cauldron they were observing, or even the Boundary, the amorphous and mysterious space drifting beyond it.

The direct intervention experiment on the Boundary using the Boundary Interface Prime Field Device. There shouldn't have been a single problem with the content of the experiment. Although there was certainly a possibility of failure in numerical terms, it was nothing more than an unrealistic assumption.

The experiment would be successfully completed, and the research team would obtain sufficient results.

That was supposed to happen.

On the day of the experiment, the 5th Hierarchical City of Ibukido, where the research facility was located, suddenly suffered a mysterious explosion.

The scale was extraordinary, blowing away a significant portion of Ibukido's features at once.

As if it had been ravaged by some kind of doomsday weapon, the city turned into a sea of flames, with casualties far beyond what could be simply described as an explosion at a facility.

The cause of the explosion was unknown.

The researchers and the residents of Ibukido who were in the city at that moment were all wiped out.

Except for one person.

Only one girl, left behind in the scorched wilderness, survived.

The girl, who was calmly wandering amidst the city's ruins, was taken into protective custody by the Novus Orbis Librarium, which had come to investigate the explosion, and was taken in by a certain couple.

Her name was…

Chapter 1: Orient Town

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2196 - Night

The meter clicks down by hundreds, announcing the depth.

A high-pitched electronic sound continued to ring out in the same perfectly unchanging rhythm, enough to drive someone insane.

It was a room like a square box surrounded by gray walls. There was no hint of human life in the cold room. There were a tremendous amount of books, various devices and equipment of all sizes packed in so tightly that it was doubtful whether they were intended for people to pass through, and colorful cords filled the floor.

Despite the air being kept normal and dust and dirt being thoroughly removed, a somewhat gloomy atmosphere drifted through the room.

In the midst of such a room, a small figure rose from a chair with a creaking sound.

The figure, illuminated by the light of monitors installed here and there, appeared to be a girl at first glance. However, the atmosphere and the dark circles under her eyes gave her a sharpness that could hardly be called girlish.

Some who felt her presence would sense intelligence, while others would feel a sense of intimidation.

Both words were fitting for her.

She hadn't had a proper sleep for several nights. Her back swayed as she walked, dragging her unrecognized fatigue, and two "tails" swayed on her back.

One was a ponytail tied high and tightly, flowing down her back. On her pink-haired head, small triangular cat ears, so small that they could be missed if not looked at closely, were peeking out slightly forward, folded slightly forward.

The other was a pink tail, the same color as her hair, which had been passed through a hole in the white coat she was wearing. The tip of the forked tail was white, and it swayed to the left and right in a thoughtful manner, as if to prove that it was not a fake.

Her figure, with its beastly characteristics, looked like a demi-human, a beast-person who was human yet not human. But she was not a beast-person. The cat ears and tail were inherited from her father. Her human body was inherited from her mother. She was a mixed-blood of beast-person and human.

With bare feet and sandals, she skillfully avoided the cords as she walked, stopping in front of a huge device that sat at the back of the room. On the monitor next to it, countless data were recorded.

The electronic sound, which was about to become one with the silence of the room, suddenly changed its rhythm and tone.

The girl, whose forked tail had been slow until then, was drawn to the monitor as if by a spring.

"...Found it."

Glaring at the monitor, and then at the device that had stopped in front of her, with tired, clouded eyes, she muttered in a low voice.

"I've found it... finally."

While moving her lips as if in a delirium, she quickly typed in more than ten numerical values and turned on several switches. The device began to start up sluggishly. But this was not the end. The work of capturing him was yet to come.

"...Six Heroes, Hakumen."

It was the name of a hero who was active during the past war, the Dark War, which began about a hundred years ago and ended about ninety years ago.

The war between the "Black Beast," a monster that drove the world to despair, and humanity, which desperately tried to crawl out of despair. History books say that he was the one who fought at the forefront of humanity at that time.

Without even looking, her fingers reflexively turned on the communication switch. When the voice of a calm man responded from the speaker, she spoke indifferently, her eyes fixed on the device in the back of the room as if she were aiming at something.

"Tager. I've captured the target. I'll start the salvage operation immediately, help me with the preparations."

"Understood. I'll head over immediately, Kokonoe."

December 30, 2199 - 13:12

The 13th Hierarchical City of Kagutsuchi.

This city, built with many layers of streets piled on top of each other, is like other Hierarchical Cities scattered around the world, with the upper layers being more well-maintained and supplied with normal air.

Conversely, the lower you go, the more chaotic the town becomes, with some areas even having a desolate atmosphere. This area, which seemed to have been abandoned despite being under construction, looked like a corner of the lower layers that had been put off.

Looking back at the scaffolding that he had been walking on for several hours, he stretched his cramped body greatly.

"It was easier to infiltrate than I expected."

The one who said this while turning his neck was a tall, well-built young man. He wore a long, bright red jacket over his black clothes, and a thick, wide, large silver sword hung at his waist.

Even more eye-catching than his clothes was the color of his roughly grown white hair. Behind his bangs that reached his eyes, his left eye was green and his right eye was red, creating a somewhat rough look.

His name is Ragna the Bloodedge.

The same name can be seen on street corners all over the 13th Hierarchical City of Kagutsuchi. The name is on the wanted posters that have been plastered everywhere.

An outlaw who has wandered in from somewhere. With such an appearance, he was actually an SS-class wanted criminal, a serious criminal with the highest bounty in history.

However, Ragna doesn't travel through dark alleys to avoid people or hide in the shadows to let passersby pass. Rather, with a natural gait that makes it hard to believe that he is really a wanted criminal, he heads for the center of the city that should be ahead of him.

This was probably a low-level area judging from the concentration of seithr in the air he inhaled - a substance that polluted the world's air along with the Black Beast that appeared a hundred years ago.

The eyes of the Novus Orbis Librarium- the organization that governs the world and manages public order, and also the organization that put a bounty on Ragna- do not reach to such lower

levels. This is even more true in Kagutsuchi, which has a large and complexly intertwined structure compared to other cities.

They prioritize only the upper layers where people of status live, and a satisfactory security system does not reach the lower layers. The residents of the lower layers do not have good feelings towards the Novus Orbis Librarium- commonly known as the "NOL". If you pass through such people, being sneaky will only incite distrust.

"But, I thought I'd be able to get outside a little earlier..." Looking around at the surroundings where there wasn't a single person, Ragna muttered to himself as he moved forward.

From here, which is deep in the lower city, you can't even see the sun, let alone the sky, satisfactorily, but according to his internal sense of time, it's probably past noon now.

Ragna, being a wanted criminal, couldn't enter the Hierarchical City by regular means.

Therefore, he used a method that no one would normally use for fear of the dense seithr: approaching Kagutsuchi on foot, infiltrating the inside of the Hierarchical City from a place under construction, and climbing up to this point.

He arrived in Kagutsuchi late last night. He hadn't eaten since then.

In other words, he was hungry.

(Ugh... I have to eat something soon. At this rate, I'll die of starvation before I reach the top layer...)

Just as he was about to hurry his steps, clutching his stomach, he was suddenly called out to from behind.

"Oh my, what a terrible figure. It's just like a stray dog seeking nothing but control. I don't even want to admit I know you. Ragna?" The one who spoke, with excessive pity and blatant contempt, was a girl's voice.

Ragna reflexively stopped his feet, distorting his expression with a feeling other than emptiness.

"You... who are you calling a stray dog, rabbit?"

The place where he turned around was deserted and empty, and further back was a dead end that was closed for construction. Even so, a small table and a black single-seater sofa were placed there, and a girl was sitting there.

Rachel Alucard.

She was a girl with long, glossy golden hair tied in two bunches on either side, wearing a black, luxurious dress. Her skin color was transparently white, the ribbons that tied her hair stood up straight, and her large eyes were bright red. Because of this appearance, Ragna called her "rabbit".

She looks about twelve or thirteen years old, but she has lived for a time that cannot be compared to her appearance. She is not a human girl. She is a vampire who lives in the long night.

She gracefully pulled a cup towards her, gently touching it with her fingertips as if testing the temperature of the red liquid inside, then took a sip. She looked up at the elderly gentleman standing behind her and smiled elegantly.

"Delicious, Valkenhayn. Your tea is exceptional even when drunk in air clouded with seithr."

"I am honored, Madam Rachel." The old gentleman responded in a calm tone of voice, bending his waist politely. The white hair that was tied behind his back slid down from his broad shoulders to the front of his high-quality butler suit.

The old gentleman, who has an old appearance but suggests a somewhat robust physique, was Rachel's butler, the werewolf Valkenhayn.

On the table, a small red, rubber ball-like creature with busy wings was frantically moving about, stuffing financier pastries with the aroma of butter into its cheeks. This was Gii, Rachel's familiar. The shape-shifting black cat that had transformed into the sofa Rachel was sitting on was another of her familiars, Nago.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"Oh, can't you tell? I'm having tea."

"That's not what I'm asking! ...Haa, well, whatever."

Ragna reflexively raised his voice at Rachel's nonchalant reply, and his shoulders dropped dejectedly. He was very hungry. And yet, there were baked goods on the table, as if to show them off, and it was hateful to see them being swallowed into the familiar's mouth.

"So? What do you want? Coming all the way out here... are you bored?" With a hint of resentment, Ragna asked sarcastically, glaring at Rachel. His glaring eyes, with a face that can never be called good-natured, somehow reminded one of a ferocious beast.

If the one here was really a twelve or thirteen-year-old girl, he might have made her cry with his extraordinary appearance. But Rachel, uninterested in Ragna's gaze, glanced up at him and sipped her tea coolly.

"My, aren't you being self-conscious? Just because I appear before you, you assume that I have business with you? Your arrogance is truly outrageous."

"The hell did you say? Tch, if you don't have any business, don't bother me. I'm in a hurry!"

"Oh my. Where are you hurrying off to, you stray dog? You look hungry, perhaps you're going to beg for some food?" Rachel asked, tilting her head and placing a childlike fingertip to her white cheek, giggling.

"How pitiful, how miserable! Maybe I'm eating better than you? Pu pu."

"Now, now, stop it Gii. It's mean to say the truth like that."

Following their master's lead, Gii and Nago burst into laughter. Towards the heads on the second floor, Ragna mercilessly swung his fist down.

"Shut up, you familiars!"

"Gyah!"

"Eeeeek!"

"Tch, they're all so talkative..." It's always like this. Ragna muttered in exasperation.

This wasn't the first time Ragna had met Rachel, the butler Valkenhayn, Gii, and Nago. For years, ever since Ragna began wandering the world, he had frequently encountered Rachel.

Each time, her appearance was sudden, her words were harsh, the reasons were unclear, and her departure was equally abrupt. So, he was used to having his plans thwarted and being caught up in nonsensical farces when he was in a hurry. But being used to it doesn't mean he didn't care.

"Hey, rabbit. If you don't have any business, I'm leaving. I'm not as free as you guys." With a frown of irritation, Ragna turned his back and quickly left. He couldn't waste any more time with them. But Rachel, ignoring Ragna's bitter irritation, calmly put down her cup and continued.

"I do have business."

"Huh?!"

"I don't recall saying I didn't. Besides, the very idea that I would come before you without business is inconceivable. I doubt your sanity." Still maintaining her cool demeanor, Rachel directed a subtle barb at Ragna as she gracefully slid off Nago's sofa. Then, with a squirm, Nago contorted its body and transformed into a parasol, fitting into Rachel's hand.

Ragna, who had inadvertently turned around, watched the scene with a twitching eyebrow, feeling a vein throbbing near his temple.

"You... If you have something to say, then hurry up and say it! I told you I don't have time!"

Valkenhayn, who had been holding back until then, stepped forward as Ragna shouted in irritation. As he approached, he glared at Ragna with a vigor that belied his age. But Ragna was used to the intimidating aura of this wolf-man, like a ferocious beast. Without hesitation, Ragna snapped back.

"Shut up! It has nothing to do with you, old man! Don't butt in!"

"You... What do you..."

"Stop it, Valkenhayn. It's pointless to try to teach manners to a stray dog." It was Rachel who restrained him, in a gentle, chiding tone. However, she didn't forget to use words that belittled Ragna.

Valkenhayn, ignoring Ragna's twitching face, turned his gaze away from him as if nothing had happened, and bowed his head to his master once more.

"My apologies, Madam Rachel."

"And Ragna, you keep going on about business, business, but I already asked you earlier, didn't I? 'Where are you hurrying off to?'"

As if piercing his heart, Rachel looked intently at Ragna with her large, red eyes. They were eyes that seemed to see through to the depths of a person's soul.

This was no longer idle chatter. It seemed that way... Ragna swallowed his harsh tone and returned a strong gaze to Rachel.

"'Where'? What are you talking about? I'm going to the NOL's Kagutsuchi branch." He tightly clenched his fist at his side.

On the top floor of the 13th Hierarchical City of Kagutsuchi, a massive building, boasting a divine exterior like the sword held aloft by a saint, towered high into the sky. At the very center and summit of the city, overlooking everything, was the Kagutsuchi branch of the Novus Orbis Librarium.

The reason Ragna had come to Kagutsuchi was to destroy that branch.

He had been traveling around the world, destroying NOL branches in various Hierarchical Cities, as well as facilities under their control. He had no idea how many he had destroyed so far, as he hadn't been counting from the beginning.

However, the crimes he had accumulated in doing so had earned him the label of SS-class criminal, a rare and unparalleled title.

But destroying the branch and defeating the guards was not Ragna's only goal. Ragna's real purpose lay elsewhere.

It was…

"I'm going to infiltrate the branch and destroy the 'cauldron'. Just like always."

The "cauldron."

Hidden beneath the branches and research facilities of the NOL was something called the "cauldron."

Its existence was not made public, and most residents of the Hierarchical Cities, even the NOL's soldiers, were completely unaware of it.

Deep, deep within the underground, in a space accessible only by the innermost elevator of the branch, was a massive object that could not be described as either a facility or a device... The destruction of the "cauldron" was the reason Ragna attacked the branches in various locations, and the purpose for which he had come to Kagutsuchi.

Releasing his clenched fist, Ragna frowned suspiciously.

"There's no need to ask something like that. Besides, weren't you the one that told me the next cauldron I should destroy was in Kagutsuchi?"

This was after he had attacked the branch and destroyed the cauldron in the 9th Hierarchical City of Akitsu, the city before Kagutsuchi. Before dawn, as Ragna was about to leave the Hierarchical City, Rachel appeared before him and indicated that he should head to Kagutsuchi.

Rachel, still gazing at Ragna, lightly shook her head as if trying to make him understand.

"I said that Kagutsuchi was the next place you should go. I don't recall ever instructing you to destroy the cauldron." It was a lecturing tone that didn't suit her childlike appearance. Feeling as if he was being reprimanded, Ragna scratched his head, a little embarrassed.

"Well... yeah, you're right about that. So what? You're saying I shouldn't destroy the cauldron?"

"No, that's not it. It's your freedom whether you destroy something or not. If you wish to destroy it, then destroy it." As if reminiscing about the past, Rachel said in a distant, murmuring tone. After a moment of closing her eyes and gazing at some scene that appeared in her mind, Rachel looked up at Ragna again and asked: "But, Ragna... What are you thinking when you destroy the cauldron?"

It was a strange question. At least for Ragna.

It was like asking what he thinks when he breathes, or what he feels when he drinks water. That's how natural, how much a part of his daily routine, attacking NOL branches and destroying their cauldrons had become for Ragna.

What, indeed. Now that he thought about it, he had never really considered it deeply.

"That... Well, it's because I don't like it. Building a city on top of a cauldron, hiding its existence, and then using it for their own selfish research... Who do they think they are?" Ragna replied with a bitter tone.

The cauldron is a gate that connects to the Boundary. The Boundary is... an otherworldly realm.

It's the outside of the world as we know it, which humanity discovered and touched long ago, changing the world. However, it's an unknowable realm that humans can never fully reach, no matter how much they try.

A hundred years ago, a monster called the Black Beast emerged from that cauldron.

The Black Beast scattered seithr throughout the world, destroying everything in its path according to its instincts... driving humanity, the world, to the brink of destruction.

Humanity fought against the Black Beast. The ten-year war was known in this era as the "Dark War," and its content, as the name suggests, was like traversing a lightless, despairing darkness.

How could humans think they could control the place where such a monster, which caused so much damage and continues to leave deep scars in the form of seithr, was born?

If the Boundary is useful, why do they hide it from the residents who live above it? If they really can control it, why don't they make its existence public?

The questions themselves became the answers. They weren't researching for the sake of helping people, and there was no guarantee that they could really control it.

That's why he would destroy it. He wouldn't allow the existence of such a thing.

Jubei, a beastkin who was Ragna's sword master, taught Ragna about the cauldron and the Boundary, and Ragna came to that conclusion.

(And the cauldron has... "that"...)

Rachel, who listened to Ragna's answer and looked into Ragna's heart even more than that, was silent for a while as if waiting for what was to come, and then opened her mouth slightly.

"That's all?" The words that spilled out softly mixed into the dusty air of Kagutsuchi, sounding somewhat lonely.

The wrinkles between Ragna's eyebrows deepened.

"What are you dissatisfied with?"

"I'm not saying I'm dissatisfied. It's just..." Rachel slid her fingertips and changed the angle of her umbrella, the parasol casting a shadow over her eyes. Her large eyes quietly averted their gaze from Ragna and blinked in the shadow.

"Ragna... don't you remember anything 'this time' either?" The questioning voice passes quietly from Ragna's ears to his inside like a cold night wind. But Rachel's wind did not stay inside Ragna, and it escaped without color or shape.

"Huh? What do you mean by not remembering?" Ragna tilted his head, peering at Rachel, not understanding what she is talking about or what she is being asked. He was getting impatient with the riddle-like questions.

Rachel put the handle of her umbrella on her shoulder and looked up at Ragna again. The color that floated in her eyes was a pale disappointment.

"It's nothing. If you don't remember, then that's fine. That's what always happens." She let her small shoulders fall with a sigh, and again spoke mysterious words. It was as if only Ragna didn't understand. Ragna frowned even more.

He was about to ask for an explanation of what she meant, but Rachel interrupted him, waving her hand as if to shoo away even a stray dog.

"My business is already finished. Now, you're in a hurry, aren't you? Go and scavenge for food or something."

After being treated like that, and then being turned away as if she had no more interest in him, where was the motivation to continue the conversation?

Ragna promptly threw away the words he was about to ask in his heart, and clicked his tongue loudly in anger.

"What the hell was that all about? Damn it, I'm going! I won't turn around even if you stop me next time!" He spat out the words as if throwing them away, and started walking with large strides, determined not to waste any more time here.

After being yelled at so much, he suddenly remembered that he was terribly hungry. His feet were unsteady. He hadn't even had a proper drink of water. And yet, he had been forced to waste time on a nonsensical riddle and an unreasonable scolding, which was unbearable.

"Damn it!" He spat out his frustration once more, and hurried towards the city that should be ahead.

Rachel, who was supposed to have turned her back, saw off the retreating figure of the red jacket over her ornate shoulder. In her crimson eyes, there was a flat, pale resignation... and a drop of concern mixed in.

As if to contain the flickering small emotions, Rachel lowered her eyelids, and turned her face away from the direction Ragna had left.

"He doesn't change. He's always the same. Again... always the same."

It was a matter of course for Rachel. It was always like this. There was never a time when it wasn't, but she always held a faint hope of "what if it wasn't," and then sighed at the fragility of that thought.

How many times had she had the same thought? It was already foolish to even count. How many times had she guided him to the same land, how many times had she asked the same question... how many times had she heard the same answer?

How many times had she failed to hear the answer she had hoped for, and been disappointed?

Even so, the reason she comes to this city again, thinking "maybe," is probably due to the persistence of her mind, which she hasn't been able to give up on even though she thought she had long since given up.

"Will the world repeat itself again? And will I send him to this land again?"

And beyond this, the world will end, and the world will repeat itself again from the beginning.

To the beginning of the "Dark War" a hundred years ago, when the Black Beast was born.

"Madam Rachel. Shall we return now?" Valkenhayn inquired from beside a table set that is unsuitable for the lower levels of Kagutsuchi.

Rachel smiled wryly.

"Yes, I would like to, but..."

But there was something else she wanted to see.

This time, Rachel looked upwards. At the far upper level of Kagutsuchi, beyond the clouds.

It was not clearly visible from here, but above was the city directly managed by the NOL for their own use.

Soon, a ship will arrive there.

"Valkenhayn, please return to the castle first. I will take a walk around Kagutsuchi a little longer before returning."

"Understood. Then I will prepare tea and await your return." Giving a respectful bow, Valkenhayn disappeared from the spot, along with the table set. He returned to Rachel's castle, which exists in a different place, a dimension that is nowhere.

Rachel, who remained, readjusted the handle of her umbrella. Waiting for Gii to bounce and come to her side, she created a rose-colored magic circle around her.

High above, in the distance, the sound of an Ars Magus ship could be heard cutting through the sky towards Kagutsuchi. She probably wanted to see what was on the ship.

"Even I find it comical."

Muttering to no one in particular, Rachel stirred up a wind scented with roses and teleported from the spot.

2

In the lower levels of the Hierarchical City, places where you can see the sky are precious.

The city is built like a pile of flat plates, and in the lower levels, even if you look up at the sky, the layer above becomes a thick, wide roof that blocks the light. Even if they built the city protruding from the upper layer, above it, countless layers still overlap as countless roofs. It is difficult to get light through them, and in the lower levels of the city, there is no choice but to rely on the light of the lights, whether it is day or night.

The lower city, Orient Town, where Ragna entered, suppressing his hunger, was no exception. Even though it was a clear afternoon, the alleys were dimly lit, and the main streets were brightly lit.

It was a very complex and miscellaneous city.

The buildings were built close as if huddled together, and narrow alleys ran between them. Some of the alleys were so narrow that it would be more accurate to say they were gaps between houses, and sometimes they were suffocatingly blocked by shelves and wooden boxes that seemed to have overflowed from the houses.

Even if you gave up on the maze-like alleys and went out to the main street, it was now overflowing with people.

Most of the people coming and going were residents of this city. Everyone had an atmosphere that was not so much starving from poverty, but certainly not wealthy, along with their clothes, and blended in with the flashy colors of the cityscapes that stood out with their primary colors.

Occasionally, among them, unusual people who did not match the scenery of the city were lost in the unfamiliar alleys, spat out onto the main street, and then jostled by the unfamiliar crowd.

Ragna, following a common example, was one of the unusual people who was spat out from a back alley.

Even though it was called a main street, it was narrower than the upper levels. Still, it was worthy of being the main street of this city, with several stores competing to attract customers with flashing neon lights.

While looking for a name that looked like a restaurant among the neon signs, Ragna rubbed his completely weakened stomach and moved his legs.

"Damn it, that Rachel... she keeps saying things I don't understand. If you have something to say, just say it clearly... damn it." Complaints leaked from his mouth as if breathing. That kind of thing is always the case. It's always the case, but he can't help but say it. "What do you mean by 'it's nothing'?"

It didn't feel like that. It just hinted that Ragna was overlooking something important.

"Damn it!" He felt inexplicably irritated. That's probably because of this unbearable hunger. He decided to think so, and shifted his consciousness back to finding a restaurant.

But the moment Ragna found a name that looked like one among the neon signs, a disturbing presence jumped out from the alley he had just passed.

"What's that!?"

"Meow!"

Something that looked like a human figure swung its fist down, gouging out the spot where he had jumped back.

Their eyes met. Red... but not human eyes. Round, just round red eyes.

He was pounced on in quick succession, and after they switched positions as if crossing each other, Ragna put his hand on the sword at his waist and braced himself.

"What? A beastkin? No..."

The human figure, bracing herself on the opposite side of the road, performing a light footwork shadow punch, had a strange appearance.

Although she was wearing clothes that completely covered her upper body, she was probably a girl judging from the figure that could be glimpsed from them. She was shorter than Ragna, with a height appropriate for a lively woman. Her legs, which stretched out from the hem of her short clothes, were a healthy tan and toned with muscle.

But no matter how you look at it, she was not a normal girl.

She had triangular cat-like ears on her large hood, and a dark brown tail with a white tip extending from her back. Furthermore, the inside of the hood did not have the usual face or organs, but a round red eyeball and a crescent-shaped mouth with bared white fangs floated in the blackness as if a shadow had been pushed in.

Ragna had seen this strange figure once before.

"A Kaka?" Ragna frowned suspiciously. He was sure he had met them once before with his sword master, Jubei. But why would he encounter one in a place like this?

"Meow! Tao is a Kaka warrior, Taokaka, meow!" Replying energetically with a bouncy voice that matched her nimble movements, the girl who called herself Taokaka pointed at Ragna with a large hand like a cat's paw. "You there! Fight with Tao, meow!"

"Fight? Don't joke around, I'm not in the mood for that right now."

He was about to die of hunger, and it was outrageous to waste any more time.

But whether Taokaka heard him or not, she grinned with her crescent-shaped mouth, wagged her tail, and launched a hook into the air with a belligerent shuffle.

"If Tao wins~, you'll treat Tao to a full meal meow! And if Tao loses~, you'll still treat Tao to a full meal, meow!"

"Don't screw with me! That means I'll be treating you either way!"

"Don't worry about the details, meow. Well then, here I go, meow!!"

"Hey, wait..."

As if not caring about his words, the strange cat girl jumped up with a swiftness like a cat, kicked off a nearby wall, and leapt above Ragna's head. Sharply cutting through the air, silver claws popped out from the round tip of her hand covered in a shelf.

"Whoa!" Ragna reflexively pulled out his sword and blocked the claws that grazed his face. The sound of metal clashing echoed loudly, and the surrounding passersby turned around to see what was happening. But rough brawls like this are by no means uncommon around here. Everyone passed by indifferently or tried not to get close, looking annoyed.

Of course, Taokaka didn't care about the eyes of those around her, and this time, she jumped on Ragna's sword that had blocked her attack as a foothold, spun around in the air, and quickly unleashed a kick as if stomping on him. Claws popped out from her toes as well.

If he took such a thing head-on, he would have his flesh torn off. It felt as if he was being attacked by a carnivore in the middle of the city.

Moreover, his opponent seemed to be only half serious. In response to Ragna, who blocked the claw attack with his sword again and forcefully shook it off, Taokaka kept a grin on her face and landed with a graceful movement.

"Oh, you're good, White Guy. But the food is... Tao's!!!"

"That's why I didn't say anything about treating you..." Naturally, Ragna's rebuttal did not reach those triangular ears.

Taokaka ran out with the momentum of a whirlwind, jumped in front of Ragna, and spun behind him.

"Fast!"

She was incredibly fast. It was all he could do to keep track of her movements with his eyes.

At the same time Ragna turned around in a hurry, Taokaka's claws swung from above and below as if biting down. He bitterly choked back a breath, and pulled his sword closer, bracing himself to at least avoid being hit directly.

But…

"Meow... got you."

Taokaka's movements suddenly slowed down. At the same time, a *grrgrgr* like she'd just heard from Ragna's stomach echoed without a sense of urgency.

He was not so naive to miss the gap when Taokaka lost her strength. Ragna stretched out his arm, grabbed her collar, and slammed her into the ground with the momentum of pulling her in.

"Ugh!" Taokaka let out a muffled cry, struggling as Ragna's hand held her down. But when her stomach rumbled faintly once more, she threw both her hands and feet to the ground, and even her tail fell limply, becoming docile.

"Ugh~, I lost, meow~~"

"Haa, haa... you damn brat! You're attacking people without a word... "

Just as he was about to yell at her in anger, Ragna's stomach interrupted his words. The pathetic sound and the unbearable feeling of weakness made his words trail off, unable to continue. It must have been the smell of steamed food or something wafting from somewhere that made him feel this way.

In contrast to Ragna, who was so exhausted that he wanted to sit down on the spot, Taokaka, who had heard the sound of his stomach, cleverly raised her head while still being held down.

"Meow! White Guy is also hungry. Then let's eat together, meow! Tao will take you to a delicious restaurant, meow!"

"You... you could at least feel a little remorse..." He felt foolish for being in a hurry and getting angry. Ragna let go of Taokaka and held his head in his hands.

He didn't care about the details anymore. He just wanted to eat. But why did he have to get involved with Rachel and then Taokaka, one after another, like this?

"Ah, damn it, I got it, I got it. Food, food! Take me to that so-called delicious restaurant. I'll feed you too!"

"Ooooh, really, White Guy!"

When Ragna said it in exasperation, Taokaka jumped up with such force that she completely forgot about being crushed just a moment ago. The corners of her eyes and mouth, which had drooped powerlessly, were already regained their liveliness.

"If that's decided, then let's go right away, meow! Yahoo, all-you-can-eat feast~!"

"It's not all-you-can-eat! Hey, are you listening to meeeeeee!"

Ragna's grumbling was of no concern to her. Taokaka grabbed Ragna's arm tightly, pushed and blew away the people on the main street, and ran through with the force of a raging wave.

A variety of dishes were lined up on a round table covered with a white cloth.

A stir-fry of green vegetables with the aroma of spices and garlic, a large plate of fried shrimp with roe, a large plate of pork and vegetables stewed with miso, a noodle dish with plenty of soup and a key placed on it, a chewy steamed rice cake wrapped in tree bark with wild vegetables, and a plate of fried noodles with a lot of seafood in the sauce.

On top of that, a large plate of freshly steamed meat buns piled high, steaming hot, was piled high, and Ragna was stunned by the sight spreading out in front of him.

In an instant, he thought it was all gone, but the freshly made steam that mercilessly stimulated his stomach and the spreading aroma told him the reality that if he reached out and put it in his mouth, he would immediately be promised a delicacy. Unable to bear it, his stomach cried out for work.

"Let's eat meeeeooooow!!" With a spirited declaration, Taokaka took the steamed rice in her right hand and the meat bun in her left, and began to eat with unimaginable speeds.

"Munchmunchmunchmunch~! Munchmunchmunchmunch~!"

Taokaka busily moved her mouth and hands, making strange noises, whether it was the sound of biting, chewing, or a cry of joy at having reached the food.

The number of meat buns decreased rapidly, and Ragna hurriedly grabbed one for himself.

"How hungry were you... is it good?"

Ragna gave a wry smile and, giving up, bit into the meat bun in his hand. Although it was about the size of his face, the skin was delicately and fluffily steamed, and the filling was juicy with the flavor oozing out, making it more delicious than he had imagined.

It was as good as he had recommended. As he was inwardly impressed, Taokaka's hand snatched six or so shrimp dumplings from right in front of Ragna's eyes all at once.

"It's delicious, meow! This, this, that, all of them are super delicious!"

"Is that so? I'm glad to hear that… oh dear."

Even if she ate so innocently and impolitely, the excessive number of items ordered and the way she stuffed herself seemed like a joke to her.

This would probably leave his wallet empty, but Ragna pushed that to the back of his mind and reached out for the food before Taokaka could take it all.

The crispy fried noodles were fragrant, the salty sauce was piping hot, and the plump ingredients bounced with a soft elasticity in his mouth.

It was too gentle and high-quality for Ragna's stomach, which was accustomed to crude meals like grilled meat or grilled mushrooms.

"Damn, it's delicious."

"That's right, meow! It's delicious! White Guy is a good guy for treating me to such delicious food!!"

"You attacked me and tried to force me to treat you, what's 'good person' supposed to mean, geez. Hey, hey, don't eat that all by yourself!"

"Ahhhhn~"

"Ahhh! Damn it, I haven't even had a bite of that shrimp dumpling!" Ragna's hand tried to stop Taokaka's outrageous act of pouring the food over the plate and into her mouth, but it was too late, and the white large plate was easily emptied.

Ragna's hand, having missed its target, trembled in the air, and he clenched it tightly to suppress his frustration.

"You..."

"Phew! Hm, what's wrong, Good Guy? Aren't you eating, meow? You can't chase after bounties on an empty stomach!"

"Shut up, you're eating my money without hesitation! ...Wait, chase after bounties?"

Unexpected words popped out from the cat girl, whose mind only seemed focused on eating, and Ragna unclenched his fist.

Chasing after bounties is, so to speak, bounty hunting. Criminals who are beyond the control of the NOL are given a bounty, and the bounty hunters chase after the wanted criminals for the bounty.

To have a bounty placed on one's head means they have committed a crime worthy of such a reward. The profit is great, but it comes with a corresponding danger.

Certainly, Taokaka's physical ability would allow her to work as a bounty hunter, but that doesn't mean that a woman, a child, or a cat would like to choose such a job.

But Taokaka, somewhat proudly, took out something like a wanted poster from her chest, spread it out on the table, and wagged her tail in a good mood.

"Meow. Tao has become a bounty hunter from today. And then~, I'm going to blow this 'Rawgnya' guy away and get a lot of money, meow!"

"Rawgnya?"

What's that ridiculous name, Ragna wondered, peering at the wanted poster out of curiosity.

The moment he did…

"Bwah!"

The moment he saw the portrait and the name, he choked and almost spat out the meat bun in his mouth.

While hurriedly covering his mouth and swallowing the contents, he took the wanted poster in his hand and looked at it closely. Along with a very ugly portrait of a man, it contained a generous amount of reward money and the name of the wanted criminal. The name written was…

"Wh-what... 'Ragna the Bloodedge'... is that me!?" As if slamming down his surging anger and inexplicable feelings, Ragna roughly returned the wanted poster to the table. "Besides, what's with this picture, it's not even close! If you don't know what I look like, don't make a caricature! It's a bit hurtful!"

"Meow? Good Guy?" Taokaka's round eyes widened in surprise as she lifted her face from the large bowl she was holding. She had been noisily slurping the soup and noodles with tremendous speed, and a piece of roasted pork was sticking out of her busy mouth.

Noticing her expression, Ragna tried to suppress his discomposure and forced a smile.

"No, it's nothing..."

He couldn't continue with "it's nothing." As if erupting, a dangerous presence welled up behind Ragna. Hostility, malice, and then murderous intent.

A low, rumbling murmur gradually approached them from the back of the store.

"Didn't that guy just say 'Ragna the Bloodedge'?"

Someone's whisper, contrary to its hushed volume, resounded around them for some reason. As if chasing after it, voices could be heard from all over the place.

"Hey, look. That white hair, red clothes..."

"'Grim Reaper'... Ragna the Bloodedge..."

"The most wanted criminal with the highest bounty in history..."

"Even if we split it, it'll be a considerable amount..."

At the sound of a chair being pulled, Ragna awkwardly turned his neck and checked behind him.

There were men and women filling the store's tables, with appearances that couldn't be described as harmless residents.

Someone began drawing their weapon.

"Hey, Taokaka." As soon as he called out, Ragna strongly grabbed Taokaka's arm, who had finished drinking the last drop of soup.

"Meow?"

Without asking any questions, he dragged the cat girl's body and started running at full speed.

Seeing that, the customers in the store slammed the tables and stood up.

"He's getting away!"

"As I thought, that guy was 'Grim Reaper'!"

"Chase him! Capture him, no, kill him!!!"

With their respective weapons in hand, they overturned tables, kicked away chairs, and the bounty hunters who were eating chased after them all at once. Even if Ragna tried to jump out of the store, tried to weave through the crowd and stumble, the persistent voices followed him without caring about anything.

"Damn it, what's with that store? The customers are all bounty hunters!!!"

"Meeeoooow, there's still a lot of my food left!!!"

"Shut up! Can't you see this isn't the time for that?" Carrying Taokaka's body on his shoulder as she tried to go back at this point, Ragna fled through the main street of the Orient Town. "Besides, if we go back now, we won't just lose our meal, we'll get beaten to a pulp! Since they saw me eating with you, they'll think you're my accomplice!"

"Meow? Accomplice? Tao and Good Guy are accomplices, meow?"

"Huh? No, that's what they'll think. Even if we say we're not, they won't listen... anyway, more importantly, isn't there somewhere we can escape to?"

The roaring voices and footsteps chasing after them, while not closing the distance, showed no signs of giving up on pursuing Ragna.

Of course, as long as they were running through the main street, their figures were visible, so there was no reason to give up.

If they killed Ragna, they'd be able to live without worries for the rest of their lives, and even build a mansion in the upper layers.

"I can't get caught by those guys no matter what!" While shouting, Ragna ran straight ahead. If he recklessly entered a back alley, he'd get lost in the intricate alleyways, and at worst, he'd run into a dead end and be cornered.

Of course, he was confident that he could defeat them if he fought them, but he wasn't confident that he could fight without involving these ordinary people in a place like this.

"I understand, meow!"

"Dowah!"

Suddenly, Taokaka jumped up on Ragna's shoulder, turned around in the air, and landed in front of him. She then used her hands like paws and ran alongside him.

"Good Guy is my benefactor who treated me to a meal, meow! And since he's Tao's friend, I'll give you a special guide, meow!"

"No, an accomplice is..."

"Kaka Village is safe, meow! Follow me!"

As soon as she said that, Taokaka kicked the ground and jumped low, then increased her speed. She quickly distanced herself, and Ragna hurriedly quickened his pace.

He remembered what happened when he was attacked earlier. Come to think of it, this cat girl was incredibly fast. If he wasn't careful, he'd lose sight of her.

"Hey, wait! Don't leave me behind!!"

More desperately than when he was escaping, Ragna gritted his teeth and chased after Taokaka, who was running with the leg strength of a wild animal.

3

December 30, 2199 - 13:25

A dull, low driving sound droned on.

It was a small sound that normally wouldn't be noticed. However, after more than an hour of silence, it was impossible not to notice it, and as she didn't want to return her consciousness to the silence, she strained her ears to the driving sound.

How much longer would she have to listen to this sound?

Sinking her slender body into the unadorned seat, Noel Vermillion, a warrant officer of the Novus Orbis Librarium's 4th Thaumaturgist Squadron, quietly sighed.

Wearing a blue and white soldier uniform, she spread a blue poncho for cold weather over her lap like a blanket and leaned her head against the wall. Despite having completed the officer school course properly, she looked somewhat younger than her actual age due to her girlish features.

Her long, straight, golden hair reached down to her waist, but now it was gathered into the blue beret she wore on her head for duty.

Her distant eyes were a soft green. She looked a little sleepy, gazing out the small window beside her. White skin, slender shoulders, slender arms. If she were wearing different clothes, she would not look like a soldier working for the NOL.

This was a ship owned by the NOL, traversing the sky - an Ars Magus ship.

Outside the small window that Noel was looking at, a white sea of clouds spread out, and the ship continued its smooth voyage to the 13th Hierarchical City of Kagutsuchi, its destination.

There were only two people sitting in the passenger cabin with rows of seats. Noel, who was sitting in the front seat looking listless, and one other person.

Although it was a relatively small Ars Magus ship, a considerable number of seats were available. Even so, there were only two people in the passenger cabin, which could not be called narrow.

Moreover, since they were not particularly close, as a matter of course, there had been no conversation for a long time, and an awkward amount of silence continued between them.

She wondered what that person is doing now. Driven by such a slight interest, Noel fidgeted slightly on the seat and gently peered behind the shadow of the backrest.

The man sitting there was not wearing the uniform of a soldier like Noel, but a black suit. He was slender but tall, with a black hat on his green hair.

Unlike Noel, he didn't seem to feel any awkwardness at all, and he crossed his long, thin legs and leaned back in his seat in a relaxed manner.

He was Captain Hazama of the Novus Orbis Librarium's Intelligence Department.

Right as the year was about to end, Noel and Hazama, who belonged to a different department, were heading to Kagutsuchi for a mission.

As long as you work as a soldier, you should basically follow orders from above. Of course, Noel had no intention of going against orders. However, that did not mean that such loyalty and sense of duty could dispel her anxiety about this mission.

(Haa... why is it just me and Hazama-san?)

Noel averted her eyes from Hazama, who was wearing a hat over his eyes and not moving as if he were asleep, and returned to the seat, grumbling in her heart while looking out the window again.

Noel belonged to the 4th Thaumaturgist Squadron, and Hazama belonged to the Intelligence Department. It was not very common for people from different departments to take on the same mission. And yet they were each sent to a land far away from headquarters.

The reason for this lay in the details of the "mission" given to Noel. This was a top-secret mission that could not leak information to unnecessary personnel.

The objective was to search for a certain person. Jin Kisaragi, Noel's direct superior, Major of the 4th Squadron, and the one she served under as his secretary. He had suddenly disappeared from the NOL headquarters a few days earlier and was missing.

If it were discovered that the commander of a division was missing due to unauthorized actions, it would have a negative impact on many soldiers and expose the internal affairs of the NOL. Therefore, information about Jin's disappearance was conveyed to only a very small number of people.

A few days later, information came in that Jin seemed to be heading to Kagutsuchi.

Although the reason for this was unknown, there was no way Jin would be allowed to continue acting alone.

Jin was immediately ordered to return to base, and Hazama, who had obtained information about his whereabouts, and Noel, Jin's secretary, were chosen for the role of conveying this order.

...And now, Noel and Hazama were sitting alone in the seats of the Ars Magus ship.

(But even so, there should be more manpower. Even if we're looking for Major Kisaragi, we don't have any information beyond that he seems to have gone to Kagutsuchi...)

Could they really find a single soldier in the vast Kagutsuchi?

Even if they were able to find him, would Jin Kisaragi listen to Noel's order to return to base and obediently comply?

(No way, he would never listen.)

Noel shook her head slightly. Although she worked as a secretary, she was always met with Jin's cold and harsh gaze. It could not be said that they had a smooth superior-subordinate relationship.

Rather, it was safe to say that it was the worst.

It was clearly a misjudgment in personnel selection. Even if they arrived in Kagutsuchi, what should they do and how should they start?

The more she thought about it, the more her anxiety grew and weighed heavily on her chest.

And there was one more major anxiety. The man named Hazama, who was sitting silently in the back seat. This was the first time she had met him on this mission, and he had a strange atmosphere, and she couldn't understand what he was thinking at all... somehow, he was scary.

(If only everyone was here at a time like this...)

Sighing once again, Noel hunched over as if trying to shrink her body.

She remembered the time she spent with her friends at the officer school before becoming a soldier for the NOL. Those were fun times. A lot of things happened, and there were difficult times, but those were happy days that more than made up for them.

In those nostalgic days, her beloved friends were always by Noel's side.

Noel wasn't a very social person and didn't have many friends. But even so, the small number of friends she had at school were precious to her.

Her two closest friends were Tsubaki Yayoi and Makoto Nanaya, who were in the same room in the dormitory.

Tsubaki called out to Noel, who was not able to fit in with school life, and took care of her in various ways. Makoto pulled on Noel's withdrawn arm and taught her many fun things.

The three of them talked about many things.

Tsubaki was smart and had top grades, so before exams, she always studied with Makoto and taught them.

They also went out together after school. They often went to a cafe with a comfortable open terrace, located a short walk from the school. It had many types of parfaits, which were Noel and her friends' favorites.

Makoto was particularly fond of them. Whenever they stopped by, a chestnut parfait in a tall glass was always placed in front of her.

Even after they were about to graduate and their future paths were decided... when the three of them went to that cafe, there was a chestnut parfait in front of Makoto.

"So, it's decided? Noel will become Kisaragi-senpai's secretary?"

It was a little early to call it evening, and the area overlooked by the clear sky was enveloped in a gentle and warm atmosphere.

Even though it was the graduation season, there were no extreme temperature fluctuations in the Hierarchical City where the climate and temperature were controlled by Ars Magus. Therefore, they could fully enjoy the parfait with cold ice cream and the coat without wearing it, in their officer school uniforms, on the open terrace.

Makoto, who was carrying the chestnut cream to her mouth, asked the question, and Noel, who was sitting across the round table, nodded slightly with a frown.

"Yeah... it's been decided."

"I see... Noel as a secretary..."

What kind of reaction should she give? With such a troubled face, Makoto put the long-handled parfait spoon in her mouth and rested her cheek on her hand.

Makoto was not human, but a beastkin. Her face and figure were not much different from an ordinary girl, but her small ears that popped out from her head and her tail, which was larger than her torso, were unmistakably squirrel-shaped.

It seemed that she had been looked at strangely in the past because of her special appearance, but the Makoto that Noel knew was an active and straightforward girl with lovely deep brown hair and big, sparkling brown eyes.

Seeing the complicated look on the normally cheerful Makoto, Noel inadvertently looked down at her strawberry parfait in front of her.

"I don't think I'm capable of doing it myself. If it's Kisaragi-senpai's secretary, someone like me..."

"Oh, that's not it, Noel! It's not that you're bad or anything like that. It's just that if you're Kisaragi-senpai's secretary..." Makoto hurriedly tried to follow up, but in the end, even those words became blurred.

Noel and Makoto were thinking the same thing.

The beginning of the story was a little before their future paths after graduation were decided. Noel, who was simply intending to apply to become a soldier for the NOL, was suddenly called in and ordered to become the secretary of Jin Kisaragi, who was the commander of the 4th Thaumaturgist Squadron after graduation.

Noel couldn't refuse it. But she had been thinking about it ever since she heard the story.

Jin Kisaragi. A senior at the officer school who graduated two years earlier, a member of the Duodecim's prestigious Kisaragi family, and a childhood friend of Tsubaki, the daughter of the Duodecim's Yayoi family.

They must have thought the same thing at the same time. When Noel raised her eyes as if peeking, Makoto was also peeking, looking at the red-haired girl sitting between them.

"You two shouldn't talk like that. There's a good reason why Noel was chosen."

With a knowing look on her face, the red-haired girl in front of them, Tsubaki, chided.

Her strikingly colored hair was glossy, long, and reached her waist, and her blue eyes resembled the color of the sky. Her posture was upright and elegant, and although she had no intention of doing so, she inevitably gave off an air of being brought up well.

Excellent grades, impeccable behavior. Such words suited Tsubaki very well. Kind to everyone and loved by everyone, she was a proud and boastful best friend to Noel. However, only a very small number of friends, including Noel and Makoto, knew that she liked bitter sweets such as matcha and adzuki beans.

With a dignified demeanor that did not shame her birth, Tsubaki took a spoonful of bracken rice cake and matcha ice cream sprinkled with matcha powder, and then continued in a gentle tone.

"Noel is good at both studying and sports, and above all, she has excellent Ars Magus aptitude, the best since the founding of the officer school. Qualities that are inherent cannot be improved later. As the secretary of the division commander, she has the perfect qualities."

"Well, I think Noel's Ars Magus aptitude is amazing. But…"

Despite agreeing, Makoto still had an unsettled look on her face. There was no objection to what Tsubaki said. But still, there was something that stuck in her mind. Noel had the same feeling, and she dropped her shoulders with a sigh.

"I... I don't have any confidence. I'm disliked by Kisaragi-senpai, and besides..."

Above all, she knew that Tsubaki really wanted to become Jin's secretary.

Tsubaki liked Jin. Not as a childhood friend or a senior at school, but as a man.

She had no memory of wanting to work by the side of someone she liked, wanting to be useful to that person. But she would understand, because she had seen Tsubaki, who had been studying hard every day to work next to Jin someday. She knew how pure and straightforward that feeling was.

However, she could not put that into words and throw it at Tsubaki.

It was not something to be treated so roughly.

So Noel swallowed the thoughts that came to her mind, along with the sweet and sour strawberry ice cream, before they reached her throat.

"Even if you don't have confidence, you have to work hard. You agreed to become Jin-sama's secretary for your parents, didn't you?"

"Eh?" When Tsubaki said that to her in a gentle way, Noel raised her face in surprise. At the end of her raised gaze, Tsubaki's blue eyes were looking at her with a gentle look.

"I heard. If you take on the secretary's position, your family, the Vermillion family's noble privileges will be restored. The Vermillion family will also be supported while you're in office."

At Tsubaki's words, Noel's heart skipped a beat. Driven by that momentum, her fingertips hit the spoon against the parfait glass.

She wondered for a moment how she knew about that, but Tsubaki was the daughter of the Duodecim. The internal affairs of the NOL would also reach her ears to some extent.

On the other hand, Makoto, who knew nothing, raised her body with a start in surprise and leaned forward.

"Eh, is that true, Noel!?"

"...Yeah. Actually..." Noel nodded, not wanting to lie to Makoto or Tsubaki.

Putting her raised belly back on the chair, Makoto slumped over the round table as if clinging to it. Her voluminous, fluffy tail also fell down powerlessly.

"Haa, I see. Then you can't refuse, can you? Your parents are... how should I say it, 'special' to you." Makoto's words, spoken with a deep sigh, were by no means sarcastic, compassionate, or anything that could hurt someone's heart. There was only simple understanding.

Makoto and Tsubaki knew, only in a rough outline, how Noel's family was "special," after hearing it from her.

Noel was adopted.

"About four years ago, wasn't it?" Makoto slowly raised her slumped body and asked nostalgically.

Noel nodded slightly.

"Yeah. During the explosion in Ibukido. I don't remember it well, but a person from the Librarium rescued me, and my current foster father adopted me when he'd heard about me."

Her foster parents, the Vermillions, were kind people.

Noel felt a great debt to them for taking her in and treating her with love. At the same time, she felt a great pain in her heart for not being able to do anything for her foster father, who was struggling with his health in a life that could not be described as wealthy.

Therefore, the conditions presented by the NOL, "restoration of noble privileges" and "economic support," were too attractive for Noel, who wanted to repay her kindness in any way possible.

"I'm sorry, Tsubaki."

Unable to bear it, Noel apologized weakly. If she became Jin Kisaragi's secretary at this time, it would be impossible for Tsubaki to become his secretary in the future unless something extraordinary happened.

It hurt Noel to think that she had crushed Tsubaki's feelings with the heavy weight of her family's situation.

Perhaps Noel's state of mind was evident on her face. Tsubaki gave a wry smile at Noel's apologetic expression and shrugged her shoulders.

"Why are you apologizing? Just because you became Jin-sama's secretary doesn't mean I can't be his secretary. Besides, with this chaotic situation where the civil war still isn't over, I'm relieved that a reliable friend is by Jin-sama's side."

Tsubaki's tone, which spoke gentle words, somehow sounded lonely and painful. It wasn't Noel's career path that was the reason. There was a more direct and immediate reason.

"The Ikaruga Civil War... Kisaragi-senpai hasn't returned from the battlefield yet, has he?" Makoto muttered as if dropping the words, while poking the remaining parfait with her spoon and scooping up the melting ice cream.

Jin was currently on the front line of the Ikaruga Civil War, having been appointed commander of the 4th Thaumaturgist Squadron immediately after graduating. That was why Tsubaki was constantly gloomy.

"Yes. My father's also gone to the battlefield and hasn't returned."

Tsubaki put a slightly bitter matcha ice cream on a silver spoon and brought it to her mouth. Then, as if spilling out her true feelings, she murmured, "...I wish the war would end soon."

"Tsubaki..." Noel called her name, but she didn't know what else to say.

The Ikaruga Civil War was a long-lasting war. Not only her father and Jin, but also many people around Tsubaki were probably talking about who went to which battlefield.

Despite their subdued tone, the murmured words carried deep emotions that resonated heavily in Noel and Makoto's hearts.

"Oh, stop it! Stop this talk! Just because we're feeling gloomy doesn't mean the war will end, and even the parfait won't taste good!" With a vigorous movement as if shaking off the heavy atmosphere that had begun to drift, Makoto stood up and gripped her spoon tightly.

When gave them a cheerful smile, the heavy burden that had been weighing on Noel and Tsubaki's shoulders was dispelled and went elsewhere. Makoto's smile always lifted their spirits, no matter what.

"That's right, Tsubaki, what about your plans after graduation? You have to decide soon, right?"

Changing her mood, she sat back down and asked in a bright voice, while hooking her finger on the teacup she had completely forgotten about in her preoccupation with the parfait.

At the bouncy voice, Tsubaki relaxed her cheeks as if releasing tension.

"Well. I've been thinking about it a lot, but I haven't decided yet. But..." After closing her lips once, Tsubaki put down her spoon and opened her mouth again. "But, I hope I can go to a department where I can follow my own beliefs. I want to become stronger in such a place. So that I can protect what is important to me."

Contrary to her dreamy tone, there was a strong determination in the depths of Tsubaki's eyes. However, no one was able to find it in this place.

"What about you, Makoto?" As if trying to deceive something, Tsubaki turned her gaze away.

"Me?"

Noel also nodded, tilting her teacup towards Makoto, who was pointing at herself.

"Come to think of it, I haven't heard much about your plans. Have you submitted your application?"

"Well… sort of."

Though she'd brought up the topic herself, she was a little uncomfortable with this kind of talk, and Makoto scratched her cheek and laughed while taking a sip of tea.

"Um, for now, the Intelligence Department. I don't know what will actually happen, though."

"Intelligence Department? That's a bit unexpected."

While bringing her lips to the cup, Noel widened her eyes. Makoto was the most skilled in combat among the three. She had assumed that she would be applying for a department that would make use of this.

Putting down her cup, Makoto now scratched her head as if messing up her hair.

"How should I put it? I want to know more about this world. If it's the Intelligence Department or something like that, I feel like I can learn a lot of things I didn't know before."

"That's true, but..."

Even so, the Intelligence Department, which avoids people's eyes and hides in the shadows to act without being known, was far from Makoto's image, and Tsubaki looked puzzled.

Little by little, everyone would be moving in different directions from their student days. Such a thought suddenly passed through Noel's mind, and she secretly hugged the teacup in her hand tightly with both hands.

"Um, you know... it's almost graduation. Even after graduation, we'll still be friends, right?"

Noel had no memories before being rescued in Ibukido. So for her, Tsubaki and Makoto were her first friends in her life. There were other people she could call friends, but Tsubaki and Makoto were special. The time the three of them spent together was truly irreplaceable.

Noel watched her two best friends as if asking for confirmation, waiting for an answer, and Makoto and Tsubaki stared back at her before breaking into smiles as if bursting out.

"Of course, Noel! Right, Tsubaki?"

"Yes, of course."

Makoto's smile, which was like a clear sky, and Tsubaki's smile, which was like a blooming flower. Their kindness warmly enveloped her, and it was so, so happy.

Noel almost cried a little while drinking her tea.

The remaining few days of student life were coming to an end, and they would no longer be attending the same classroom, and they would no longer be able to wear the uniforms of this military academy. But even then, she thought that they could always get together like this and spend a peaceful time like this afternoon, surrounding a single table.

However, after that day, they never had the chance to visit this cafe together.

4

She wondered how long she had been immersed in nostalgic memories.

"...Lieutenant? Hello? Lieutenant Noel Vermillion?"

Suddenly, she heard a man's voice from right beside her.

"Huh, ah, y-yes!"

A beat late, Noel came to her senses and hurriedly straightened her head and body from the wall she had been leaning against.

In the passenger cabin where there were only two people, only one man could call out to her. Pressing down on her slipping hat, she turned around and saw the figure she had expected.

Black suit, white shirt, black tie, black hat. His green hair was so long in the front that it hid his eyes, and from the depths of those eyes, which were difficult to tell whether they were open or not, he looked down at Noel from a high position with an exasperated look.

"Are you finally awake? Honestly, we're still on duty, you know? Even if we're in transit, a nap is quite carefree, isn't it?"

"I-I'm sorry, Captain Hazama. But, um, I certainly wasn't sleeping...!"

While she thought being dazed was not much different, Noel straightened her posture and made excuses to Hazama, who was looking down at her. At that moment, she felt something terribly cold down her spine.

(Eh... what...?)

The air conditioning in the Ars Magus ship was comfortably adjusted, and she wasn't feeling unwell.

And it was too... horrifying to be a chill from an unexpected cold.

Why was she being attacked by such a sensation? The unreasonable chills, no, rather, the fear, grabbed Noel and wouldn't let go.

Meanwhile, Hazama began to talk on his own, as if he didn't care about Noel being unable to speak.

"It's nice that you got plenty of rest, but we've already arrived in Kagutsuchi. If you stay on board like this, your work won't start at all, so could you please get off?"

"Eh, ah..."

Come to think of it, the driving sound during the voyage had stopped sometime. When she turned her gaze to the small window, the scenery outside was not the sky but a port for Ars Magus ships.

The fear that had been clogging her chest until just now was gone, and a feeling of shame rose like a rush.

Noel grabbed the seatbelt buckle as if jumping at it, and started to try to undo it. Her fingertips fumbled due to her agitation, and she couldn't undo the seatbelt, which should have been easy.

"I-I'm sorry! I'll get off right away, right now!"

"Oh, is that so? Then I'll get off first, so please don't break the seatbelt." With a light chuckle, Hazama waved his leather gloved hand and left the passenger cabin. Watching his back as he left, Noel's expression crumpled wretchedly as soon as she turned her face back to the seatbelt. She didn't even notice the descent, let alone the announcement of it. What a blunder.

As Hazama said, she was too carefree even though she was on duty.

After a bit of delay, Noel finally escaped from the unfastened seatbelt, and while putting on her blue poncho, she hurriedly rushed outside.

The 13th Hierarchical City of Kagutsuchi, Port 5.

Located at the edge of the upper layer, one of the smaller and quietly established ports among many, it was a port used for matters and missions that could not be made public even within the NOL.

Due to its intended use, there were fewer personnel working there compared to other ports. The number of Ars Magus ships that come in and out of the port was not very large, and it was a

quiet port with few people around, but even so, it had a glamorous air that suggested that it was directly managed by the NOL.

The face of the port, so to speak, was the large clock hung in the management building. The gold hands indicating the time were finely decorated to the tips, giving it the appearance of a work of art.

With the large clock watching over the port with elegance and dignity, a small Ars Magus ship, which had entered the port under the name of the Intelligence Department of the NOL Headquarters, quietly rested its body.

Metal stairs extending from the abdomen of the ship urged passengers to go to the floor of the port.

While holding the handrail of the stairs, Noel looked around at the scenery from there. The sky was a pleasant clear day. The air, controlled by sorcery, was refreshing, and there was almost no magic element.

From this location, it was difficult to see clearly because it was blocked by the management building and the entrance to the port, but she could see some NOL facilities lined up beyond the relatively new Port 5.

Beyond that, in the distance, the well-organized cityscape, typical of the upper layer, spread out. The green of the trees planted everywhere was deep and glistened in the sunlight. The buildings lined up were based on white and blue, giving a somewhat clear impression.

It was a beautiful city. And it was very large.

"This is Kagutsuchi..."

It was Noel's first visit to the city.

If it weren't for the information from her superior and senior at the military academy, Jin Kisaragi, she might not have visited it.

Sliding her fingertips covered with white gloves on the handrail, Noel ran down the short stairs and descended from the Ars Magus ship to the port. Beyond the protruding passageway, Hazama was leaning against the pillar of a one-legged clock, which pointed to the same time as the large clock, looking bored.

The sight startled Noel for a moment, and she ran towards him.

Noel was a little uncomfortable with the man from the Intelligence Department. The first time she had properly met him and talked to him was when she was summoned for this mission, but

when she was in front of him, she felt somehow overwhelmed and swallowed up. However, she couldn't avoid him. He was the only collaborator in this top-secret mission.

Standing at attention in front of Hazama and straightening her back, Noel gave a small salute to the superior officer from a different department.

"I-I kept you waiting, Major Hazama. I was very rude earlier."

"No, no, I'm used to waiting, so please don't worry about it." Hazama etched a deep smile on his lips, raised his body, and gave a light bow while speaking in a soft tone.

If you only listened to the words, it was normal and sounded considerate. But Noel felt a vague suspicion about his strangely suggestive way of speaking and exaggerated gestures, and she inadvertently looked down. At the same time, she felt somewhat depressed at her own narrow-mindedness, even though nothing had been done to her.

(He's not a bad person... I think.)

Even so, she felt sorry for the feeling of discomfort that welled up in her chest as if seeping out.

As Noel looked down with her salute still in place, Hazama suddenly clapped his hands as if he had come up with something.

"Ah, that's right, that's right. And about the 'Captain' and that salute, let's get rid of those formalities. I'm not your direct superior, and you're not my direct subordinate."

"Eh... but, but..."

"Those things are so troublesome. I don't want to put on a superior's face to you either. There's no one watching us, so please, okay?"

With a deep smile at the corners of his mouth, Hazama tilted his head slightly and looked down at Noel. His bangs were long, and the brim of his hat cast a shadow, making it difficult to see the eyes behind them. Even so, the gaze that was staring at her was clearly felt.

"Understood. Hazama… san."

Feeling that it would be rude to refuse outright, Noel nodded hesitantly. But she couldn't suddenly change her attitude as if turning her hand over, so she tried to start by at least changing how she called him.

Satisfied, Hazama's smile deepened and he spoke again.

"Now then. Let's get down to business right away. Our objective this time is to search for Major Jin Kisaragi, who is currently missing. If we find him, we'll tell him that a return order has been issued from headquarters, and if he obeys quietly, that's fine, but if he doesn't, we will have to restrain him and forcibly take him away."

At Hazama's words, Noel's expression became tense and stiff.

This was no longer the NOL headquarters where she had spent her days. It was Kagutsuchi, an unfamiliar city, although it was under the control of the NOL.

Hazama continued in a tone as if he were explaining to a student.

"Currently, Major Kisaragi seems to be hiding in Kagutsuchi. His objective is most likely Ragna the Bloodedge, the wanted criminal known as the 'Grim Reaper.' He went missing immediately after we received information that he was headed to Kagutsuchi, right?"

"Yes. The name Ragna the Bloodedge seemed to ring a bell with him. ...Although I didn't confirm it..." Noel replied with a serious face.

The last time Noel met Jin was when she delivered a report on the wanted criminal, "Grim Reaper."

At that time, Jin, as always, seemed reluctant to even deal with Noel. He snatched the report and changed his expression as soon as he heard from the Intelligence Department that the "Grim Reaper's" name was Ragna the Bloodedge.

Jin was laughing. Calm and ruthless. Noel clearly remembered that Jin, who always had an icy expression, laughed aloud only at that time. Noel had never seen him like this, not even during his student days or after becoming his secretary.

"Um, may I ask a question?"

"Yes, please?" Hazama gestured the the innocent Noel to prompt her.

Feeling as if she was being tested by his stiff smile, Noel couldn't look up at Hazama's face.

"If the information is correct, then Kisaragi-sama and Ragna the Bloodedge are hiding in Kagutsuchi, right?"

"That's what it seems."

"Um, if we come into contact with Ragna the Bloodedge before we find Kisaragi-sama... which one should we prioritize...?"

Arresting criminals was one of the duties of soldiers. If she encountered the "Grim Reaper" Ragna, Noel would normally have to move to arrest him.

Hazama put his hand on his black hat as if grabbing it, and replied with an indifferent, "Ah. Well, deal with it appropriately. I'll leave it up to you."

"Eh, is that... appropriate?"

Could there be such a, well, appropriate instruction? Noel's eyes widened in surprise at such an uncharacteristic response from a superior officer. Hazama, in a relaxed tone without any sense of urgency, opened his hands at shoulder height.

"You see, my mission is to secure Kisaragi-sama. As long as you complete that task, I don't intend to give you detailed instructions about the rest."

Saying that, he shrugged his slender shoulders and smiled lightly.

Not knowing how to react to that smile, Noel ended up only stammering with her lips and couldn't say anything. She wondered if she should say something back, or if she should keep her mouth shut. Such thoughts kept popping up in her head, and she kept thinking about them.

Meanwhile, Hazama put his hat back on and moved on with the conversation.

"Well then, I have some business at the branch office, so could you start the search from the lower levels first?"

"Branch office? What kind of...?"

"Oh, have you forgotten? I'm in the Intelligence Department, after all. I have a lot of business that I can't share with other people... could you be considerate?"

Hazama's smile shifted to a wry grin. His manner was gentle, but there was something somewhat mocking in his tone. It was as if he was exasperated with a child who didn't understand, and that made Noel feel impatient.

She must not forget. This was an important top-secret mission. She couldn't afford to fail, and she couldn't cause trouble for the Intelligence Department.

Noel straightened her back again, and with her hands tightly attached to her sides, she looked up at Hazama. Noel couldn't tell what kind of eyes were looking at her from beyond the shadow of the black hat and the long bangs.

"Understood. Then, um... I'll start the search from the lower levels."

Surely there was a structural drawing and map of Kagutsuchi in the materials. Relying on that, she should be able to reach the lower levels without getting lost. She was a little scared to go all the way to the lower levels... but she couldn't say such a thing.

(I'll find Kisaragi-sama quickly and return to headquarters.)

If Jin's disappearance went public, Tsubaki would surely worry. More than anyone else.

It's not that Noel wasn't worried about Jin. More than that, she was worried about the heartache that her best friend from high school would suffer.

Letting the cool port wind wrap around the ample hem of her donned poncho, Noel walked past Hazama as if slipping through. Before her feet had taken many steps, Hazama's voice stopped her from under the clock.

"Oh, right, I forgot. Lieutenant Noel Vermillion."

At the leisurely and drawn-out call, Noel turned around wondering what it was.

Hazama was leaning against the slender leg of the clock and looking at her.

"Currently, a D-alert has been issued in Kagutsuchi. It's the one that prohibits intervention from other organizations due to a state of emergency. Apparently, information that Ragna the Bloodedge is hiding has leaked to the outside from somewhere, and because of that, it seems some dangerous individuals have gotten involved. Please be careful when going to the lower levels."

For a warning from a member of the Intelligence Department to a soldier of the NOL, it lacked much urgency.

Hazama waved his hand lightly and saw Noel off.

He was not so much an irresponsible person as he was a person without any pretenses. She didn't know him well, but surely this was how he always was. With this impression in mind, Noel once again straightened her heels and lowered her head in a bow.

"Yes. Then, excuse me." This time, she turned her back and exited from the gate of Port 5 to the main city.

The sky looked close when looking up from the upper layer. The sun shone in the slightly cloudy sky color due to the magic elements drifting outside the city, pouring overflowing sunlight onto the ground. Receiving that light, the white-dominated upper city shone dazzlingly.

If she went straight on the large road, she could reach the center of the city. But where Noel should head was not the city center but the lower levels. She would turn left from here and head for the magic lift for NOL soldiers.

While letting the gold-colored hair spilling out from her hat shine in the sunlight, Noel took out a map of Kagutsuchi from the materials and spread it out. Seeing the overall view like this, she realized the size of this city once again.

(Well then... for now, I'll go down as far as I can and then come up from there.)

If possible, it would be best if she could find Jin immediately and he would obediently follow the order to return to base, but it was unlikely things would go so smoothly.

Her feet were likely to become heavy with worries about the future, but Noel lightly shook her head to refresh herself. There was no point in thinking only negatively. Now, she just needed to focus on what she should do, and take action as much as she could.

"...Be strong. I have to do my best."

After encouraging herself in a small voice, Noel raised her face and began to walk quickly through the upper city of Kagutsuchi.

There were red eyes watching every single part of that scene.

On the top of the management building, which was part of the 5th Port and had a large clock hanging, a small figure was gazing down at the bottom, on the roof decorated with delicate designs.

Wearing a black dress, a black bag on her shoulder, and her ribbon-like golden hair dancing wildly in the strong wind that traveled through the high sky, was Rachel Alucard. Her red eyes were fixed on the figure of the soldier girl talking at the port.

"As I thought... that child is..."

The words muttered from her innocent lips were carried away by the sharp whistling wind. It was a mutter that should not have reached anyone's ears. And yet... the man from the NOL who remained at the 5th Port suddenly turned back to Rachel.

It was a man in a black suit. His name was... Hazama.

He looked up at Rachel nonchalantly and lifted his hat.

A grin, like a thin, deep slit, was carved on his lips.

It was a sneer. Or rather, a mocking laugh.

It wasn't accidental. He was looking up at her accurately, and he knew who Rachel was... that's why he laughed.

It wasn't surprising. Rachel also knew. She knew who that man in the black suit was... and why he was laughing.

Because she understood, it was even more irritating.

"...I wonder what kind of stage you will show us this time?" Rachel whispered to the sneering man on the ground. Her voice wouldn't reach him. The wind would cut it apart and blow it away somewhere.

But the man turned on his heel at the perfect moment, as if he had been waiting for Rachel's words to finish, and left the 5th Port as if nothing had happened.

What remained was Rachel. She turned her gaze to the top of the high mountain where Kagutsuchi was located, while holding her umbrella on the roof. As if holding a sacred sword on the top of the mountain, a white and pure building towered there. The Kagutsuchi branch of the Novus Orbis Librarium. That was... the stage for the performance that was about to begin.

Chapter 2: Cross fate

1

December 30, 2199 - 17:15

As he followed the guide, before he knew it, the city of Orient Town had come to an end.

The neon lights, the signs, and the crowds had gone somewhere, and they were surrounded by a scenery that was hard to believe was within a large city, where only the framework and the foundation of the city began to move.

Chasing after Taokaka, who was leading the way with light footsteps, Ragna walked along the rocky path. It was not a paved road for passing, but a path like a mountain trail that was created because it was repeatedly trodden.

The fact that such a place was left unattended not far from Orient Town shows how little the lower layer of Kagutsuchi was in the eyes of the NOL. About half a day after the infiltration, not to mention the bounty hunters, they had yet to encounter any soldiers from the NOL, let alone even see them properly, which made him convinced of the current situation.

"Good Guy~, this way, meow~" Taokaka waved her big hand, nimbly crossing over what looked like the remains of a rockfall.

Ragna was used to rough roads, but this journey was a bit tough for post-meal exercise. Jumping down a steep step that was too steep to be called a staircase, Ragna finally realized that he had arrived at his destination. It was a hollow cave with a high ceiling and a wide opening. It was a wild space that was hard to believe was inside a large Hierarchical City.

It was much more humid than outside, and of course there was no sunlight, and it was dark all around. There were no colorful neon lights or streetlights like in Orient Town, but instead, torches and bonfires were lit here and there, and he could see several huts built between them.

"Is this... the 'village' you were talking about?"

Kaka Village. When he heard that, he was worried about what kind of outrageous place he would be taken to, but seeing it like this, it was certainly a village. It seemed that there was a different society there from the Hierarchical City of Kagutsuchi and Orient Town.

"That's right, meow. It's the village of the Kaka tribe where we live, meow." Taokaka puffed out her chest proudly and wagged her tail happily. "You can rest here. Outsiders can never come in here."

"Yeah, that entrance is something you wouldn't enter unless you had a guide or some kind of accident."

A crack in the rock face at the edge of Orient Town, where there were only half-destroyed and abandoned huts and no one approached. Who would imagine that such a place would lead to such a village through a crack that could hardly be called a road?

Perhaps there were several other entrances, but at least Ragna would never think of trying to enter that crack.

"Now that you've come to the Kaka tribe's village, it's good to meet the elder, meow. The elder knows everything, meow!"

"Elder?"

Was she talking about the 'chief'? Ragna reluctantly followed Taokaka's bouncing figure, who had started walking without even waiting for a reply. It was unreasonable to ask that cat girl for a logical explanation.

Besides, if the 'elder' really knew everything, that would be perfect. While he was here, he might as well ask for a convenient shortcut.

Although, if that 'elder' was the same kind of person as Taokaka, he couldn't rely on him much.

When they left the wild rocky ground, a stone pavement-like ground appeared. Passing between the sporadically lit bonfires, Taokaka headed for the house furthest in among the small houses lined up.

The wooden door, which had a strange mark drawn on it instead of a nameplate, was a little small for Ragna. Taokaka opened that door with a very cheerful momentum. She stepped in with a casual stride without any hesitation.

"Elder, I'm home, meow!"

"Hey, you..."

For a moment, he wondered if it was a house for a wealthy person, but considering Taokaka's personality, she probably didn't even understand the meaning of a wealthy person. It wouldn't get through to her even if he said something. Ragna swallowed his grumbling words, scratching his temple in exasperation, and followed Taokaka.

Passing through a cloth hung like a partition, he entered the back room. There, without even confirming, was the 'elder' that Taokaka was talking about, sitting on a pile of cloths.

Her body was much smaller than Taokaka's, and even if she stood up, her head would not reach Ragna's chest. The shadowy face with round eyeballs and a crescent-shaped mouth wasn't there, but was hidden by a mask that imitated a guardian. However, the clothes that completely covered her body, the downward-pointing triangular ears, and the cat's tail extending from the back were very similar to Taokaka's.

In her large hands, which were shaped like a cat's paws, she held a pillow that was larger than her height, and just that made him feel that this masked Kaka tribe member was in a special and prestigious position.

The hair that flowed out from between the hood and the mask was fluffy and had a bright water-gray color, and the long tail that gently swayed only at the tip also had the same mysterious color.

"Oh, elder! I brought a guest!" When Taokaka energetically raised her hand and tail, the elder, leaning on her cane, slowly raised her waist and responded in exasperation.

"...Tao. I told you this morning to open the door more quietly."

"Huh? Was that so, meow? Well, don't worry about the small things, meow."

From that appearance, Ragna lost all tension and vigilance, and involuntarily dropped his shoulders behind Taokaka in amazement.

The elder looked at him slowly and sullenly through her mask.

"...Our guest."

"I'm sorry to intrude. It's just that... well, there's been a lot going on." Ragna, on the spur of the moment, was about to blurt out the whole truth, but he stopped the words that were about to spill out.

It was fine up to the point where he was attacked by Taokaka and was about to be forced to treat her to a meal, but he couldn't carelessly talk about how he was known as a wanted criminal by the bounty hunters and was chased after. Let alone that he was the bounty head "Ragna the Bloodedge" that Taokaka was chasing after.

"Elder. This white guy is a good guy, meow! He gave Tao a lot of food to eat while I was starving!" Taokaka cheerfully rejoiced, her expression joyful as she raised both hands high and posed like a banzai.

"Well, I haven't treated her yet." Ragna scratched his head out of a little guilt. That was unavoidable. But in reality, it was certainly a dine-and-dash.

With a small sound, the cane of the masked elder poked the laid-out cloth. Relying on that, the elder of the Kaka tribe took a few steps forward.

"Hmm... it seems that Tao was indebted to you. I'm sorry. Please allow me to express my apologies and gratitude as well." She was a Kaka tribe member who was smaller than Ragna, and even smaller than Taokaka. Her aged voice, though rough, had a certain charm.

Being addressed so formally made Ragna feel awkward. He frowned in confusion and looked away.

"Nah, it's nothing. It's already over... Besides, I'm the one who ended up being helped."

If there hadn't been a wanted poster there, Ragna's identity wouldn't have been known to the people around him, but it was Ragna himself who carelessly shouted the name of the most wanted criminal with the highest bounty in history. It's not like he didn't have a shred of gratitude for Taokaka, who took him to her village without even hearing the circumstances.

Ragna hadn't even told Taokaka his identity, let alone his name. And yet, being treated so unguardedly made the usually harsh world he was in seem ridiculous.

"Oh, that's right, Elder. Taokaka said that you 'know everything,' but are you familiar with the geography around here?" Pulling back the feelings that were about to completely slip away, Ragna asked the elder.

Taokaka's purpose was probably just to have them meet, but for Ragna, there was no point in entering this house unless he heard that.

"I want to go to the upper layer of Kagutsuchi. Do you know of any ways to get there as quickly as possible, or any secret passages, or anything like that?"

He couldn't criticize Taokaka. He was hardly polite himself and asked bluntly, looking down at the elder of the Kaka tribe without hesitation.

Without taking offense, the elder of the Kaka tribe leaned on her cane, raised her face, and stared at the white-haired young man standing before her. After a pause as if deeply pondering something, and when Ragna became slightly irritated by the silence, she slowly replied from under her mask.

"There is a path that leads to the outskirts of the upper layer."

"Seriously!? That's a big help!" At the elder's leisurely tone, Ragna took a step forward as if lunging at her.

The elder didn't flinch even when approached by a man taller than her with a weapon hanging at his waist. She was either very calm or just easygoing. Like Taokaka, who had already settled down in a corner of the room and was stretching her body, Ragna couldn't gauge how shallowly he should estimate what was inside him.

"Please, let me use that secret passage. Won't you guide me?" He was about to lunge again, but Ragna suppressed his volume as much as possible. But at his side, he clenched his fist tightly and pleaded.

"Are there people... waiting for you above?" The elder, who looked like a resident of a fairy tale, asked quietly and deeply.

Ragna gritted his teeth and swallowed. "I can't say."

To destroy the Kagutsuchi branch of the NOL in the uppermost layer. Ragna's purpose was clear and simple, but to lightly mention it here would be to make this village his collaborator.

Though he kept his reasons to himself, Ragna directed a sharp, stern gaze straight and sincerely at the elder.

"I just have to get to the upper layer no matter what. There are things I have to do."

He doubted how much meaning human sincerity had to the tribe living in this dark town. But to the nonchalant Taokaka, who was already doing something like grooming, the elder looked back at Ragna's eyes and remained silent for a while, as if thinking.

Eventually…

"Very well. Tao, please guide him."The elder turned to Taokaka and spoke with a breath that seemed like a smile.

Called by her name, Taokaka, who had been narrowing her eyes sleepily, perked up her ears and looked up.

While glancing at Taokaka, who jumped to her feet, Ragna opened his mouth to confirm.

"Is it okay? To tell me?"

"It doesn't matter. Even if it's a secret passage, it's not like we made it. We're just telling you about a road that's been here since long ago." Saying that, the elder, as if laughing, brought her long sleeve to her mouth and tilted her head slightly.

The long, hairy tail that swayed leisurely was, like his gestures, somewhat languid.

"Here, Tao. Go on."

"Meow!" Urged, Taokaka made a gesture that imitated a sharp salute. Jumping up, she lined up next to Ragna and moved her big hand, urging him to come.

Ragna couldn't help but burst out laughing briefly. He thought he hated all the Hierarchical Cities controlled by the NOL, but this place didn't have a bad atmosphere.

"Alright, I'll ask you to guide me." Relaxing his rigid expression into a loose smile, Ragna lifted the cloth that served as the entrance to the room, as if brushing it aside, and followed Taokaka, who had bounced out. Stepping out, he turned back over his shoulder.

"Well, I'm sorry I disturbed you. Thanks for telling me."

"It's nothing. Be careful on your way, disciple of Mitsuyoshi-sama."

"Eh?" Ragna stopped at the name the elder uttered. Mitsuyoshi. It was a name he didn't know. Ragna was about to ask who she was talking about…

"Good Guy, let's go, meow!"

"Ugh!" Taokaka, who had jumped on him, wrapped her arms around his neck from behind and hung on him, stopping him. Perhaps his backward-leaning neck and head were so funny, Taokaka, still hanging on him, flailed her legs and frolicked.

Grabbing the arms of the cat girl, whose weight had suddenly increased, Ragna desperately, literally desperately, tried to straighten his body.

"Guh, ooh... let me go, you..."

"Come on, let's go. Secret passage, secret passage, meow. Otherwise, Tao will go play, anytime, meow. Good Guy will play with me, meow!"

"I'm not going to play! I don't understand what you mean!" While shouting, he peeled off Taokaka's clinging body. When he threw her, Taokaka put her feet on the wall and lightly reversed her body, passing Ragna and descending lightly.

"Meeeeooooowww~" She ran out of the hut playfully like a kitten.

"Wait, wait, wait! Where are you going on your own! Guide me!" If he left her alone, she might really go somewhere on her own. He had only just met Taokaka. He didn't know what kind of

circumstances she was born and raised in, or what kind of background she had. He hardly knew anything. But... he had a feeling that she was the type to really go somewhere on her own in situations like this.

"See ya, grandma! Live long!"

As he left, he couldn't think of a farewell greeting on the spur of the moment, and he threw those words away as if abandoning them, and chased after Taokaka, leaving the elder's house.

The rough sound of the door closing shook the small house, and the hurried footsteps faded away. While listening to it... Elder Totokaka chuckled.

"My, my... what energetic children they are."

It was as if the wind had rushed through.

The elder leaned on her cane and returned to her designated spot on the piled cloths, then slowly lowered herself there, taking a deep breath as if recalling a distant past.

It was shortly after Ragna chased after Taokaka and set off for the secret passage. In the quiet room after the sudden visitors had left, the elder was dozing off on her favorite spot, the piled cloths.

The Kaka tribe's village was always peaceful and always serene. Even now, many Kaka people were probably enjoying their naps in their favorite spots all over the village. There was no Kaka tribe member who disliked naps.

It was at such a time the Kaka tribe's village welcomed another guest.

The wooden door was knocked on with a calm tempo. At that sound, the elder's slumber burst like a soap bubble, and her head, which had been leaning against the pillow she had crossed her arms on, rose.

"Come in." The elder responded, still sitting on the cloth.

But whether they had been waiting for that or not, the door was opened almost simultaneously with the words, and four small Kaka tribe members rolled into the elder's room one after another.

The first was Mikekaka, with a light green ribbon on her chest and her white, brown, and black tricolor tail held upright. The second was Tamakaka, with a black tail wagging and an orange ribbon on her chest. The third was Pochikaka, with only the tip of her white tail dyed gray and a

pink ribbon on her chest. The fourth was Yalkaka, with a water-colored ribbon on her chest and a black tail with only the tip white.

"Elder!"

"Elder~ Elder~"

"There's a guest~"

"I guided her~"

The four small Kaka who came in, saying things one after another and jumping around, brought with them a woman.

"I'm sorry to be noisy, excuse me, Elder-sama." The woman being led by Pochikaka and Yalkaka said with a wry smile and a polite demeanor.

She was a beautiful woman. She wore a long dress based on red and white, and her sensual limbs could be seen through the body-hugging fabric. Full breasts, a constricted waist, and shapely protruding buttocks. The long legs extending from there swayed her red dress with every step, and a cool rustling sound echoed in her hair.

Her name was Litchi Faye Ling. She was a young female doctor who ran a small hospital in a corner of Orient Town.

In contrast to her alluring figure, her slender glasses and deep-colored eyes, framed by long eyelashes, were dignified and intelligent.

She was the main one who had knocked and one of the few people who knew of the Kaka tribe's village. She was close to the elder and visited the village like this from time to time.

She wasn't just here to play with the Kaka tribe members she knew.

Litchi was a doctor. In addition to checking the health condition of the Kaka tribe members who couldn't go to the hospital in the city, she was also asked by the elder to investigate the Kaka tribe's ecology. Today, she'd come to report on that investigation.

The elder invited Litchi, who bowed her head in greeting at the entrance of the room, into the room in a friendly manner.

"Litchi-dono, you've come all the way here. Please sit down. I'll get some tea."

"No, that's alright. I don't think it will take long." While gently declining, Litchi was about to sit down on the round cushion that Mikekaka had brought. But that action stopped when she knelt.

"Eh?" A sigh of doubt leaked from her thinly rouged lips. Litchi's finger was touching the small stuffed panda attached to her hair. As if she was talking to it, she turned her attention to the stuffed animal in her hair, and then suddenly Litchi's expression became slightly tense.

"Elder, I'm sorry to ask you something strange. But... did someone come here a little while ago?" While touching the small panda hair ornament with her fingertips, Litchi slid her eyes behind her glasses and looked at the elder.

Her seductive gaze, which would not fail to captivate a man if she smiled like that, was now secretly sharp and trying to find something.

Tilting her head at Litchi's sharpness, the elder answered as she was asked.

"Hmm, Tao brought a guest. He said he wanted to know a secret passage that leads to the upper layer, so I had Tao guide him to the sewer that can be reached from the outskirts of the village."

"To the sewer? What did he look like?"

"He was a young man. With white hair and wearing red clothes."

"White hair, red clothes... and this presence." As if breaking something in the back of her throat, Litchi bit her lip slightly and covered her mouth with her fingertips that touched the stuffed panda.

She had felt an unusual presence. It was something she had often been exposed to, not as a doctor, but as a researcher before coming to this city. And something she continues to secretly experience even now, behind her work as a doctor.

The presence of the Azure.

"This is bad!" Taking a breath, Litchi stood up as if she had been bounced. "I'm sorry, Elder-sama. I'll come back later!"

Litchi said this in a panic as she threw away the documents and rushed out of the small house, her clothes and hair looking disheveled.

2

With each step he took, the dull footsteps echoed all the way to the ceiling.

It was dark in the middle of a dark secret passage.

Entering through a crack in the bedrock at the very edge of the village, where no one from the Kaka tribe would approach, the secret passage to the upper layer that Ragna walked through was a sewer.

The ceiling was high, and the wide passageway was lined with many pipes. They circulated through Kagutsuchi like a maze, leading wherever they felt.

It was as if it were an artificial blood vessel attached to the rocky mountain that supported Kagutsuchi. He, who was passing through it, would be a foreign object for Kagutsuchi. Thinking such a thing made him feel somewhat cynical, but even so, his footsteps did not lighten at all.

The secret passage used by the Kaka tribe to go to the upper layer was a terrible, rough road.

"Ugh..."

The unpleasant, watery, and sticky footsteps could be heard from below, and Ragna's expression sank gloomily. How many times had he felt this way?

"Bye-bye, meow! Come play in the village again anytime, meow!!!"

It wasn't even an hour ago that he parted with Taokaka, whose piercingly cheerful voice was so out of place at the entrance of the secret passage.

If the starting point was at about the same altitude as Orient Town, how much did he need to climb to get to the upper layer? Thinking about that, it had been too short. But Ragna's chest was already full of discomfort.

It was unlikely that the sewer, which passed through the back side of the lower and upper levels, would be clean and well-guarded.

Mountains of discarded waste from who knows where were piled up here and there, and around them, muddy black things like sludge, sewer water, and slippery puddles of oil were playing a foul game.

The lighting was extremely poor, with a few lights occasionally dotted here and there, most of which had already lost their function. Instead, what illuminated Ragna's feet and helped him proceed was a strange light that grew on the floor covered with dirty waste and dirt.

An unpleasant warmth and a nauseating feeling weighed heavily on him. With every breath he took, he felt himself becoming turbid from the inside.

Worst of all was the seithr filling the air. If a normal human were in such a place, their body would become abnormal in a few hours, and if they spent a night there, they might not remain in their original mental state.

If there were any creatures living here, they would have long since been captured and maddened by the seithr, transforming them into something that should not be.

"Come to think of it, that Taokaka girl said something." Ragna muttered, suddenly remembering as he scraped an unidentified liquid from the bottom of his shoe. Before they parted, he received a warning from that silly-looking girl. That strange monsters appeared in this secret passage.

"Was it 'Squiggly'?"

The monster that Taokaka called by that name had a black body and seemed to be lurking in this sewer. It sometimes came to the Kaka tribe's village and ate their children.

It was probably some kind of animal that had been transformed by this excessive seithr.

It was ironic, Ragna thought.

Seithr was a particle substance that, if inhaled or touched in large quantities, could drive a creature mad or even destroy it.

It was a terrifying thing. That's why the NOL used a technique called Ars Magus to purify the air and supply it to the city. Even the air in the lower levels, where the concentration of seithr was high, had overwhelmingly less seithr compared to the outside of the city.

How did Ars Magus purify the air? It used seithr.

Ars Magus was activated using a grimoire and seithr. In other words, Ars Magus could not function without seithr.

However, what seithr was in the end, no one had yet been able to explain to the world. No one knew. What was seithr? Was it good or evil?

Moreover, humans could not live without seithr.

From air circulation to water purification, transportation, construction technology, and even cooking, Ars Magus was deeply involved in life. If seithr disappeared from the world and all Ars Magus became unusable, then the current human civilization would collapse.

That was why it was ironic. While fearing and eliminating seithr, nothing could be accomplished without it. That was very unsettling.

"It's still quiet." Unable to endure the long silence and the rhythmic footsteps, he muttered something to himself at every opportunity.

Normally he wouldn't have been talking to himself so much. But this place was bad.

It was dark and damp, and it looked as if some unknown shadow was peeking at him from here and there. From the gap between this pipe and that pipe, or from the back of the narrow side road he had just passed. He felt a non-existent gaze.

Come to think of it, he felt like he'd heard a story set in a place like this long ago. How long ago was it... that's right, when he was a child. It was a story he heard from his foster parent, the sister.

It was a story like this. One rainy night, a man was walking through a tunnel. Then suddenly he felt a presence behind him. But even if he turned around, there was only darkness there. The protagonist continued to walk, telling himself it's just his imagination. But the presence keeps getting closer and closer, and then suddenly he hears someone's voice in his ear…

"I..."

He heard someone's voice.

"Hic!" Ragna's throat shook and twitched. A sudden presence came up behind him. Ragna pulled back and turned around, desperately trying to deny that something was there.

What appeared in Ragna's vision was a white face. From the darkness, which looked like layers of shadows, only the floating face was staring at him.

The face was empty. Its seemingly hollowed out eyes reflected nothing, and its simplistic mouth was emitting a strange voice without changing its shape.

"Grrrr... I... need... I... need..."

A sound that could not be called a human voice. It was the voice of a grudge from one not of this world.

"Oh..."

A ghost. The moment that word came to mind, Ragna's whole body froze.

No, not something like that. Something unreasonable and bizarre, untouchable, unable to be cut down even with a sword, something that completely ignored his violence and resented him with curses and grudges.

A chill ran through him and fear stopped Ragna's breath. But…

"Hm? This guy..."

Feeling uncomfortable, Ragna frowned and kicked the floor to get some distance.
It was dark and barely visible, but he strained his eyes to see.

It looked like a white face floating... but in reality, something black and amorphous was wriggling around the white face.

Wriggling and trembling, with thin bones occasionally popping out, the blackness was a presence familiar to Ragna, unlike ghosts and spirits.

"Seithr?" Ragna muttered lowly, with hostility, and he glared at the white face again. His hand naturally reached for the sword at his waist.

It was not the grudge of the dead nor a wandering soul, but a mass of seithr that had gathered and taken shape.

Whether it was born from the seithr that lingered in this sewer, or whether it entered from outside Kagutsuchi, he did not know, but judging from its shape, this was probably the "Squiggly" that Taokaka had talked about.

Looking up at Ragna with its white face, it slid and crawled towards him.

"Aaah, Azure, Azure! I can smell the fragrant scent of Azure. The path to all wisdom..."
The mass of seithr called out in a muddy voice. It could be heard as a human voice, but the already unclear voice was fragmented and cut off, and he couldn't understand it. But Ragna had no intention of listening and understanding in the first place.

When he saw that the liquid, mud-like thing was moving and jumping up, Ragna quickly drew his sword at his waist and braced himself.

The mass of seithr changed its body into countless sharp needles in the air, and fell down to pierce Ragna.

The intention to attack was clear. More than intention, it might be instinct.

Ragna drew his sword and held it up, catching the descending seithr with all his might.

"Tch!" The wriggling seithr was heavier and sharper than he'd expected. A screeching sound rang out from his sword and sparks flew.

The black monster had a foul appearance. It was like sludge accumulated in the sewer. It was sticky and wriggled as if dragging an unpleasant weight. It was probably some other creature originally. But now, it was a deformed thing that was clearly outside the framework of life.

"Uraaa!"

If so, there was nothing to fear. Roaring from the bottom of his stomach, Ragna pushed it back with a swing of his sword, then lightly jumped and swung the sword vertically.

"I'll crush you!"

"Kikikiki!"

Ragna's slash, carrying the weight of the sword, quickly struck the shadow.

He intended to crush it together with the face, but the shadow, looking at Ragna, trembled and shook, and in an instant, it fell to the ground with a splattering sound as if being sucked in, slipping through Ragna's feet. It raised its head again, and began to chant something from behind.

"Geh!" It was a mist of seithr. Ragna quickly spat out what he had inhaled.

Meanwhile, worm-like bugs wriggling one after another jumped out of the seithr's body and pounced on Ragna.

Seithr and small deformed creatures.

"You gross bastard!"

Watching it filled his heart with disgust. It was coarsely irritating.

Ragna put strength into the hand gripping the sword's hilt. Power flowed from inside him as if blood was being washed away. Pulling back greatly, he swung it in an arc towards the countless insects that were jumping in.

Suddenly, a sound like a burning bag ripped through the air. The sword that Ragna swung had somehow become a black, ominous flame-like darkness.

The insects were burned by the dark flame and scattered, turning to dust and falling miserably to the ground. But they immediately returned to the body of the seithr, their master.

The deformed creature laughed loudly as the returning insects swirled around its feet.

"Kakakaka! I saw it, I saw it, it's Azure, you, your power is Azure! Unfathomable truth..."

It swelled up from below and burst, and at the same time, the deformed creature jumped up. From its expanded body, countless beetle leg-like organs emerged. Trembling, it jumped toward Ragna.

Ragna quickly retreated. In the next instant, the strange feet tore apart the floor where he had been standing.

The white face glared at Ragna resentfully, as if regretting that it had missed its prey.

"Gugu... come here, come here! I will eat, devour..."

Interrupting the monster's creaking voice, Ragna's slash swept through the seithr's body.

The sword, swung with a deep lunge, was wrapped in darkness. If the monster was a shadow, then what swallowed even that shadow would be darkness. As if subduing everything, Ragna's darkness slammed the deformed monster into the rubble, chemicals, and darkness.

A scream like crushed mud, a scream that could not be uttered from the throat of any animal, rang out.

The crushed body rippled on the floor, gradually swelling and rising again. Its amorphous back trembled as if convulsing, and it stared at Ragna with empty eyes.

Ragna jumped once more, aiming for its face. This time he caught it. A heavy slash swung down towards the monster's head. It was... violently deflected by a rod-shaped object that came flying while rotating from the side.

"What!?" Losing his balance in midair, Ragna's body was forced to change its trajectory in an unexpected direction. He didn't want to touch it, but he put his hand on the piled-up rubble and reversed his body, landing on the slippery floor. Looking up, Ragna noticed an unexpected figure.

"Please, don't interfere anymore." The one who spoke was a woman's voice, suppressing her emotions as if trying to restrain them, yet still conveying a softness.

A dark, smelly, and filthy sewer. In that place with debris clinging to it, a woman was standing.

It was a woman in red clothes, with exposed, sensual thighs that looked white even in the dark. The design of her dress, with the large opening in its chest, would've attracted a lot of attention if she wasn't in this place.

But here, the clothes looked like they were only meant for jumping around and fighting.

What had been circling in an arc high above the ceiling was caught in the woman's hand as if being entangled. That was what had deflected Ragna's sword. It was a rod as tall as her.

The woman, with her long, ankle-length hair, gazed at Ragna from behind her slender glasses.

"Please, withdraw." She said once more.

Ragna lowered his waist and braced himself without letting his guard down. He re-gripped the sword that had almost slipped out of his hand.

"Who are you?"

"I am Litchi Faye Ling... a doctor."

"A doctor? What's a doctor doing in a place like this? And why did you get in the way?"

The rod just now was not for attacking, but for protecting that black monster from Ragna.

"Gu, gaga... agagagaga!" The black shadow monster groaned and wriggled, making a sticky, boiling sound. Its empty eyes looked at Ragna, and then at the woman, Litchi. There were a few seconds of hesitation.

After that... it let out a shriek like scratching metal and threw its body into the darkness behind it.

"Hey, wait a minute!"

Thinking it was escaping, Ragna was about to turn his sword towards it, but by the time he did, the mass of seithr had already disappeared in an instant, as if melting into the shadow and losing its shape.

3

At the same time the shadow-like figure disappeared, the strange voice and the disturbing wriggling sound also disappeared, and the surroundings regained silence as if nothing had happened.

The white face, which had been maintaining its shape somewhere in the gap, was already nowhere to be seen. The surroundings had turned into nothing more than a peaceful and filthy sewer, as if nothing had happened.

"Tch!" A spitting-like click of the tongue emerged from Ragna's mouth. Meanwhile, a relieved sigh escaped from Litchi's lips.

Hearing that, Ragna turned a sharp gaze towards Litchi.

"You said you were a doctor just now?" Ragna asked with his sword in hand, smoldering with hostility.

Litchi, who had been staring at the area where the black monster had left, turned at Ragna's voice.

"Yes. That's right."

Compared to when she stopped Ragna by throwing the rod, her nodding, soft reply didn't fit the background of this stinking sewer. It was also hard to believe that she looked like a doctor, but even so, Ragna felt that she didn't really want to take up a weapon and fight.

"If you're a doctor, why the hell are you protecting that thing? Do you think it won't do any harm if it lives?"

A seithr monster that nests in the sewer. To know it exists and leave it alone is tantamount to accepting the loss of lives that await it.

"That doesn't sound like the words of a doctor. What? Are you keeping it for some kind of purpose?" Instead of pointing the tip of the sword downwards, he hurled extremely aggressive sarcasm.

At Ragna's words, Litchi frowned, looked down, and picked up the panda hairpin that was attached to her long, lowered hair. Holding that small stuffed animal-like thing to her chest, she replied as if dropping it.

"His name... is Arakune. His real name is different, but that's what he's called by people who've seen him in Kagutsuchi." Litchi's voice shook sadly.

Finding the meaning of that sadness, Ragna frowned with emotions different from hostility.

"'He'... does that mean that thing was once a 'human'?"

Although it was interrupted, unclear, and very jarring, the voice of the monster called Arakune was certainly closer to human speech than a beast's growl. Yes, he should have heard it several times. He was saying "Azure." Looking at Ragna, he said "Azure."

"He used to be a colleague who worked with me in the same workplace. He's in that form now, but in the past, of course, he had a human form, and he wore a white coat and held a book... he was a very talented researcher." The sad swaying in Litchi's voice was a nostalgic melancholy of recalling the past.

"Research, huh... I wonder what kind of research he was doing." Ragna deliberately said it as if throwing up. If the result of the research was that form, then no other research could be as worthless.

Perhaps taking it as a question, Litchi continued the story self-deprecatingly.

This place, like a vast secret room where no one else could eavesdrop, probably tempted her into wanting to talk to someone.

"He was researching the Boundary. The Boundary, he said... was something involved in the formation of the world and the birth of humanity. He became more and more absorbed in that research... and then one day, he changed."

The seithr body, the inhuman organs, and the large number of strange creatures that made up his current form.

Perhaps he touched the Boundary too much. It could also be said that he got too close. As a result of being involved with the Boundary beyond human knowledge for too long, his existence was drawn into the Boundary, and he lost the form he originally had in this world.

Litchi looked up from the small panda hairpin she'd been holding to her chest. With her thick lips and slender eyes, a pure, innocent gaze stared at Ragna as if pleading.

"A year ago, I finally found him in this city. I continued my research near him, hoping to one day return him to his original state. I want to bring him back from the Boundary. That's why..."

Litchi swallowed and held back the words that were about to rush out of her mouth. Perhaps she didn't want to show that she was flustered. Perhaps she didn't want to be thought of as being flustered.

Litchi suppressed her emotions in a long blink, and turned her calm eyes towards Ragna again.

"That's why I couldn't let you kill him... Ragna the Bloodedge."

"...You knew."

When his name was called, Ragna's vigilance caused his neck to stiffen slightly. He put strength into the arm gripping his sword, careful not to be noticed.

Litchi didn't brace herself, but instead gave a wry smile as if relaxing.

"Everyone knows your name. Wanted posters are plastered everywhere in Orient Town. Although... the portrait doesn't seem to be very accurate."

"Well..."

While still wary, Ragna couldn't help but frown. It was a picture he didn't really want to remember.

With a smile on her lips, Litchi gently narrowed her eyes. It was a truly feminine expression, both gentle and sharp.

"The most wanted criminal with the highest bounty in history, the 'Grim Reaper' who's been attacking the Librarium's branches one after another. And the owner of the strongest grimoire, the 'Azure Grimoire.'"

The Azure Grimoire. The legendary grimoire that is rumored to be the strongest and whispered to be able to do anything because of its immense power.

But in reality, Ragna knew well that the legendary grimoire was nothing like that.

Litchi continued. When she slightly shook her head, her tied-up long hair swayed like a tail.

"I can tell even without a picture. Because... I can feel it from you. A strong power. The power of the grimoire in my mind."

At those words, Ragna frowned suspiciously.

It would be fine if it was determined by Ars Magus or an instrument to identify grimoires, or by knowledge gained from observing the grimoire's functions, but why could Litchi, who hadn't used Ars Magus or even witnessed the Azure Grimoire, sense its existence?

Ragna immediately arrived at a simple answer.

"Don't tell me... you..." Ragna's eyes became even sharper. It wasn't a sign that he was about to attack Litchi, but one of blame and reproach. Understanding what those eyes wanted to say, Litchi clearly nodded.

"Yes. I also touched the Boundary. Just like him... to learn what he'd been doing. If I did that, I might find a hint to save 'him.' Maybe I'd find the answer I was looking for... or so I thought."

He didn't need to ask if that choice had borne fruit. Arakune attacked Ragna, and Litchi stopped it. That fact was the answer.

"This Lao Jiu is connecting me to the Boundary. I've learned a lot thanks to it, and I've gained a strong body."

What Litchi introduced as Lao Jiu was the small panda plush that she was holding to her chest.

Ragna couldn't see how it worked, but the power of the Boundary seemed to be flowing from that stuffed animal to Litchi.

Litchi was a perfectly ordinary woman dressed in somewhat awkward clothes, but she wouldn't look out of place walking on the main street of Orient Town. But inside, she possessed information, senses, and physical abilities that she shouldn't have.

The wrinkles between Ragna's eyebrows deepened. His empty hand was gripped into a tight fist.

"If you've gone that far, you should already know, right? That Arakune guy is already beyond saving. Once he's become like that, he can never return to being human again." Ragna said in a low voice, as if presenting an unshakeable truth.

The Boundary is by no means a place that helps people. So why did researchers in the world, without learning from their mistakes, want to touch that mysterious thing? Ragna couldn't understand their nerves.

"...Even so, that doesn't mean I can abandon him. I..." Without retreating from Ragna's harsh words, Litchi also tightened her expression sternly. In her heart, there seemed to be a firm determination that she had been holding onto. No matter how unreasonable it was, it was imprinted in her as the only truth within her.

As if showing her will, Litchi returned the panda Lao Jiu, her connection to the Boundary, to her tied-up hair.

Ragna unconsciously clicked his tongue.

"You're an idiot... If you become a monster yourself, it'll be meaningless! Get away from the Boundary right now. You won't be able to come back!"

Again. Just like when he was confronting Arakune earlier, he felt a kind of simmering irritation.

Litchi narrowed her eyes. She was smiling, but the gaze through her slender glasses was as stubborn and strong as ever.

"Thank you for your concern. But... this is the path I have chosen. No matter what kind of ending awaits me, I will not give up." Litchi spoke like she didn't expect him to understand. "Or, will you lend me the Azure Grimoire instead of stopping me? It might be able to help him."

With a slightly self-deprecating smile, Litchi looked at Ragna as if testing him.

Ragna grimaced and let out a bitter sigh. His breath was hot with irritation, but it soon cooled down.

He was already beyond impatience and anger. Even though she'd witnessed the danger of the Boundary right in front of her, this woman didn't harbor the fear she should have, nor did she withdraw her hand, but rather, she was trying to get even deeper into it.

Foolish... without even knowing what the Azure Grimoire was like.

"Tch... do what you want. It's got nothing to do with me in the first place. I don't care what happens to you, or who gets eaten by that monster."

Looking away from Litchi, Ragna turned on his heel and turned his back. Continuing a parallel conversation would only be meaningless. More than anything, he was in a hurry. He didn't have time to talk to a woman in such an eerie place. But even so, his feet stopped, and Ragna turned back once over his shoulder.

"It's none of my business, but I'll say it one more time... things that have changed can never return to their original state. That's a fact."

Litchi's expression grew sad at Ragna's words and, without affirming or denying them, she watched his red back be swallowed into the darkness of the sewer.

4

December 30, 2199 - 9:23

Below the lower levels of Kagutsuchi, even further below Orient Town, the city spread out.

On the rugged bedrock, there were roughly carved, unstable footholds. Although it was by no means a desirable place to build buildings, the city was built with various ingenuity, with bridges spanning deep crevices and pillars driven into steep rock faces.

Even so, not all of the roads could be paved, and some of the houses were left in a half-finished state, so it could not be called a sophisticated cityscape.

This was commonly known as Ronin-Gai.

The townscape, which strongly imitated the style of the Ikaruga region, had a unique atmosphere that combined gorgeousness and simplicity.

But for the man who had just stepped into this town a dozen or so minutes ago, the name of this town, its efforts and ingenuity, and its origins were utterly irrelevant.

Blue boots stepped forward in a regular manner on the path that had been made by moving rocks and tamping down the dry earth.

The one who continued to walk silently was a young man with white skin and golden hair. There was no trace of emotion in his well-featured face or his beautiful green eyes.

The young man, who kept his lips tightly closed and moved his feet quickly without looking aside, wore a uniform based on blue and white, the uniform of a soldier of the NOL.

Major Jin Kisaragi, the commander of the 4th Thaumaturgist Squadron of the Novus Orbis Librarium.

He had suddenly disappeared a few days ago and infiltrated the 13th Hierarchical City of Kagutsuchi on foot, instead of using the Ars Magus ship that NOL soldiers would normally use for travel between Hierarchical Cities.

His goal was the uppermost layer, the NOL branch. But he was not heading there for surrender or return.

Silently stepping on the dry earth, Jin raised his head and looked up. Following the rock face of the high mountain that supported Kagutsuchi, he moved his gaze upwards.

Because it was at the very end of the lower level, Ronin-Gai was rather blessed with the sky and the sun. The sky was clear and sunny, and the ground of the uppermost layer could be faintly seen beyond the thin clouds.

There, even one more above that.

The NOL branch towering on the summit, there... eventually the "Grim Reaper" would appear.

That, and that alone, was his one and only purpose.

The "Grim Reaper," Ragna the Bloodedge, a wanted criminal who went around destroying NOL branches in various parts of the world. How many times had he repeated that name in his mind before reaching this place? How many times would he repeat it in his mind between here and the branch, his destination?

That name, as if it were a spell, commanded Jin's feet.

Walk. Head towards him... and...

But something suddenly fell and cut through Jin's vision, which seemed to be only looking at the destination and recognizing only that.

What fell were three things. Three black, shiny short swords were lined up and stuck into the ground just before Jin's toes, which he had stepped out.

They were special daggers called kunai.

Like the townscape, they were weapons that had been used for a long time in the Ikaruga region. They were also frequently used in the Ikaruga Civil War, which began eight years ago when the Ikaruga Federation declared independence from the NOL.

Jin had also participated in that war, just before its end. He knew about the weapons and the existence of special Ikaruga soldiers who used them.

"Ikaruga ninja, huh?" Muttering in a cold voice without inflection, Jin lifted his gaze, which had been taken by the kunai, and stared ahead.

It was on a bridge suspended over a deep crevice on the way to the upper layer. There should have been no one in that place until just before the kunai flew, but a man was standing there with his arms crossed.

He was a man with deep brown hair tied high in a single ponytail, his strong body clad in a deep green ninja outfit. On his back, he carried something that was too large to be considered a weapon, like a nail.

On his forehead was a large cross-shaped scar, and beneath it, powerful eyes burned brightly as he glared straight at Jin.

"Jin Kisaragi!!" The man roared with pressure that seemed to blow away the seithr-infused wind. As soon as he uncrossed his arms, he pointed at Jin's face as if holding a spear. "What on earth do you intend to do by appearing in our town! Are you not satisfied with tarnishing the pride of Ikaruga? Do you still intend to trample on our people!?"

Every time the man shouted, the air vibrated from the pressure. The intricately woven ropes supporting the bridge trembled and shook, but not because of the seithr-infused wind.

The man with the cross-shaped scar - as his appearance and weapons indicated, the ninja from the Ikaruga Federation, Bang Shishigami- was furious, his temples bulging with blue veins.

Jin, who had been stopped by the kunai, stared at him coldly. He didn't understand anything the man in front of him was saying. If all the information possessed by this cross-shaped man was water, it wouldn't reach Jin's brain, but would freeze near the kunai.

Jin stared at the man, and then, without hesitation, took a step forward. As if he couldn't see the man with the cross-shaped scar, he walked past the stuck kunai, and threw words at Bang, who seemed slightly bewildered by his reaction.

"You're in the way. Move." He tried to slip past him as he was. But...

"I won't move! There's no way I'll move! Jin Kisaragi! Do you intend to ignore me!?"

Coming to his senses, Bang spread his arms and blocked Jin's path.

The road in Ronin-Gai was narrow. He couldn't pass through this way. Jin was forced to stop again.

"What are you trying to do? Do you want to be killed?"

Cold green eyes looked at the obstructer. Their gaze was like a needle of ice. They were so unwavering it was hard to believe they belonged to a human.

Bang momentarily lost his words. It was as if he was staring at a mineral. What kind of mind did he have to make that look?

"I asked what your intentions were first! What else are you planning to do to Ikaruga...?"

But Bang's question seemed irrelevant to Jin, like it didn't even exist.

"Ikaruga? Ridiculous... I have no business with you people." As expected, there was no warmth or emotion in his voice. Rather, the temperature lowered even further and his eyes grew slightly sharper. "Move. Otherwise, I'll kill you."

Saying this, Jin reached for the blue sword he was carrying. It was something on a different level from ordinary weapons and weapons distributed by the NOL. This was not a weapon. It was a weapon of war.

About a hundred years ago, during the Dark War era, when humanity was on the verge of extinction, it was a phenomenon weapon, a Nox Nyctores, created to fight against the worst threat in human history.

Its name was Mucro Algesco: Yukianesa.

When Jin touched the hilt, he felt a coldness that burned his skin even through his thick white gloves. The power hidden in that sword was the ability to break ice. Death freezes everything. The enemies standing in his way, the detestable obstacles, and even the heart of the one who wielded it.

There was no emotion in the gaze that stared sharply and coldly at the target in front of him, just like the blade of Yukianesa itself.

Recognizing that, Bang finally changed his premonition into conviction. He had no choice but to do so.

"You... don't tell me you've forgotten... This face of mine, this scar on my forehead!" Bang's voice trembled as if wavering. Gripping his fist like a rock, Bang pointed to his forehead with his thick finger.

The cross-shaped scar was a large one that extended not only across his forehead but also between his eyebrows and below his eyes. It was clear even to those who didn't take up arms and fight that it was not a scar caused by a half-hearted attack. Even if they didn't have a close relationship, this scar would leave a strong impression.

But Jin...

"I don't know you."

He couldn't remember anything.

It was natural for Jin.

He knew from his appearance that the man in front of him was an Ikaruga ninja, as he made no attempt to hide his true identity. But when he served as the 4th Squadron's commander during the war, he did not count how many ninja he had crossed blades with. It was unreasonable to expect he'd remember a single ninja when he didn't remember any of the others he'd cut down.

But for Bang, Jin Kisaragi was the exact opposite. No matter how many soldiers he crossed blades with, no matter how many deaths he overcame, he would not forget that face.

"You bastard! You should remember! I am the Ikaruga ninja, Bang Shishigami! On the day of that decisive battle in Ikaruga, I was the man whose forehead you split open with that sword!"

The engraved cross-shaped scar was from Yukianesa. The pain from that time, the intense coldness, remained under the scar even now.

That was not all. Bang once again pointed his finger at Jin.

"I won't let you forget! Even if you forget my face, you hurt many Ikaruga people in that war, you mercilessly trampled on our homeland! And above all, you killed our lord, the Ikaruga lord Tenjo!!"

Jin Kisaragi joined the Ikaruga Civil War as the young commander of the 4th Squadron and achieved remarkable results. He broke through the front lines and took the head of the Ikaruga Federation's leader, the instigator of the rebellion.

He was praised for his achievements and promoted two ranks to major, and at the same time, he was praised as the "Hero of Ikaruga."

That alias was praised as an honor within the NOL, but it was regarded with fear and hatred among the people of Ikaruga.

"The 'Hero of Ikaruga,' indeed, meeting you here is like meeting you after a hundred years. It must be the guidance of Lord Tenjo... who died in regret that we have met again like this!"

Putting strength into his stomach, Bang opened his legs wide and took a low stance. The hand that stretched out to the sky became a strong hand that could cut through blades. Its tip was aimed at Jin's throat.

The red scarf-like cloth that adorned Bang's neck fluttered greatly in the wind that passed through the bridge. Using the light fluttering sound as a signal to start... Bang jumped in an instant.

The jump was high and fast. Released in an instant, despite his strong build, were three sharp kunai that cut through the air. They were the same as the ones that had stopped Jin's feet earlier. However, this time the purpose was not to stop his feet. Jin jumped backwards to avoid them as they approached his torso and legs.

In the next moment, Bang landed in front of the retreating Jin, fluttering his red cloth.

"Tch!" Jin's breath caught in his throat. As if interrupting it, Bang's fist thrust upwards from below.

"Know the pain of Ikaruga in my fist!" The fist was wrapped in flames and was about to explode on Jin's lower jaw... but it was blocked by Jin's sheath, which he had pulled in as if to interrupt it.

"How insolent!" The pulled fist immediately changed into a thrust with both hands, slamming into the slender stomach of the uniformed figure. Jin also received this with his sheath. However, he could not completely nullify the impact, and Bang felt the recoil of flesh in his hand.

Jin frowned slightly at the unexpected impact that had struck his body. But the shallow wrinkle quickly disappeared, and he manipulated the sword, which he had been using for defense, in his hand. The slightly rotating sheath, along with the pointed tip, struck Bang's face hard.

"Gah!" Bang let out a crushed cry. Continuing, Jin kicked Bang, who had lost his balance, and pulled out his sword to fill the gap that had opened from the recoil. The sword, swung in a large horizontal sweep, slightly grazed the tip and failed to capture Bang's torso.

"...You dodged it?" Jin spoke in a small voice. This was somewhat unexpected. Even though he was from a defeated country, the ninja was apparently able to move to some extent.

Bang, who had escaped in the nick of time, immediately turned to offense. Rushing through like a whirlwind, he instantly circled behind Jin and swung down a wind-cutting chop at the exposed blue back.

The words came before that hand could touch him.

"Is that the pain of Ikaruga?"

Ridiculous. Jin's words, asked from behind his back, were so cold that there was something like an ice pillow gouging his chest.

In Bang's vision, where he swung his hand, the golden hair swayed like scattering. Green eyes stared at Bang, and the sword drew a silver arc as if chasing him. As it was, Yukianesa was about to cut off Bang's arm, regardless of whether its opponent was unarmed.

"What!" In an instant, Bang blocked the sword strike with his gauntlet. But there was a second strike. Jin's sheath, which was held in a different hand from the sword, violently struck Bang's temple. Passing through the loosened gauntlet's guard, Yukianesa diagonally cut through Bang's body.

"Guaaah!" Bang's scream was cut off. He was hit by the slash, and his entire body was frozen immediately afterwards.

Jin kicked it away, looking extremely bored.

The life-sized ice statue rolled and flew to the other side of the bridge, crashing into a pillar. The ice that had captured Bang shattered and burst from the impact, spitting out the heavily wounded ninja. By that time, Bang's body could no longer move properly.

"Guh... gaah... Jin... Kisaragi..."

Still, Bang raised his head and struggled to get up. His eyes, which glared up at Jin even as he crawled on the ground, were not at all discouraged, and he still had the same strength and heat as his first attack.

A shallow sigh escaped Jin's mouth.

The sight of Bang collapsed there but still trying to climb up was reflected as something ugly in his green eyes. The battle had already been decided. He had just learned the difference in ability between himself and his opponent. And yet, he struggled miserably. It was so ridiculous.

"He's not here." He whispered in a barely audible voice, a faint feeling stirring within. "Even if I look at something like this... I won't find him."

"Brother" was not there.

Jin held Yukianesa and looked at the man glaring at him from across the bridge. Casually, yet with beautiful and flawless movements, he cut through the air. At that moment, ice ran from Jin's feet across the bridge.

A sound echoed like something being shattered. The ice froze the entire narrow bridge and ran upwards, creating a thick wall at the bridge's entrance. Dull sunlight shone in, making the ice sparkle. The transparent ice showed Bang's agitated face through it.

"You- you're running away! Turning your back on the enemy is the last thing a samurai should do...!"

Bang was surprised as he realized the meaning of the sudden obstacle.

Jin simply looked at him with cold eyes.

"You're my enemy? Don't be conceited." Jin returned Yukianesa to its blue sheath and turned on his heel. "You're not even worth killing. Disappear."

Leaving those words behind, he started walking away quickly. He could hear something like an angry voice from behind, but it was already out of Jin's ears. It was useless to even register in his mind.

He had wasted unnecessary time. Jin quickened his pace.

He felt incredibly empty. The time he spent dealing with that man was pointless. He had not come this far for that.

His purpose was singular and absolute. He was searching. For that man. That man who should be in this city.

"I have to... find my brother." Crushing a small lump of earth with his heel, Jin muttered as if in a trance. "I have to kill him. Ragna the Bloodedge... I have to kill my brother..."

The whispering breath that slipped out was colder than the wind passing through the mountainside, and his gaze at the layer above Ronin-Gai had a cold-blooded murderous intent far below human body temperature.

The sound of his hard shoes moved forward as if it were his duty, and the blonde young man in a blue-and-white uniform was sucked into the next level.

5

Just go down to the point where you can get off.

With this thought, Noel descended to an area called Ronin-Gai.

The city wasn't built on a solid foundation like the upper levels. Houses were built directly on the rugged rocky areas, and bridges were hung to connect the roads without filling the opened crevices...

It couldn't be said that there was no artificial ground at all, but with its extreme difference in elevation and slope-like mountain roads, it was a sight that Noel wasn't very familiar with.

Was this the appearance of a town built in the lower, lower levels, in an area where even the soldiers of the NOL rarely descended?

Coupled with the Ikaruga style Noel wasn't familiar with, it was as if she had wandered into an unknown, different world.

In fact, everything there was something that Noel had never experienced. For Noel, who hadn't spent many years as a soldier, it was also her first time walking in such a dense and defenseless atmosphere of seithr.

If she stayed in such a place for a long time, her body might break down. Noel applied an Ars Magus barrier to her surroundings and headed for the first bridge leading from the narrow mountain road descending from the upper layer to Ronin-Gai.

Was this also Ikaruga style? The bridge, which didn't look very sturdy, was written with letters that Noel could not read, and it was designed to be walked across.

Although it looked light and slender enough to be overturned by a strong gust of wind, it was surprisingly unshaken and sturdy when the wind actually blew. But this bridge, strangely enough, had ice clinging to it here and there from the middle to the other side.

"That's... horrible!"

Noel, who had been cautiously crossing the bridge due to the unfamiliar scenery and the unknown town, suddenly turned her poncho and ran.

At the end of the bridge, a person had fallen down.

For some reason, a half-melted ice block was sitting at the end of the bridge. With the momentum of the run, she used Ars Magus to jump over the ice block and landed lightly, then Noel immediately knelt beside the fallen person.

"A-are you alright?"

The one who had fallen was a man. He had a strong, muscular build and his disheveled hair was tied tightly in a single bunch. On his back, for some reason, he carried something unusually huge, like a nail.

On his face, which was distorted in pain on the rough ground, a large cross-shaped scar remained on his forehead. It was Bang.

"Guh... you..." When Noel touched him as if grabbing his arm, the man with the cross-shaped scar, Bang's, face contorted even more painfully and he muttered in a hoarse voice.

"I'm glad you're conscious."

Relieved, Noel looked down at the ground where he had fallen and found a large amount of blood.

He was injured. And it was a considerably deep wound.

Surprised by the large amount of blood, Noel turned Bang's body over, thinking that she had to check the condition of the wound. The man's limp body was heavy and she couldn't move it without the power of Ars Magus.

"C-cold!" Bang's body rolled over, and the diagonal wound was exposed to Noel's eyes. As she had imagined from the amount of bleeding, the wound was quite severe. But more than that, Noel was concerned when she touched Bang's shoulder. It was terribly cold. It didn't seem to be hypothermia due to a serious injury. Something cold was clinging to it.

"Is this ice?" Muttering, Noel looked at the bridge behind her. There was ice there too. It was in a deliberate position, as if it were a barrier. "Why is there so much ice... No, I need to treat this man first, and fast."

If he's bleeding this much, he might die.

Thinking this, a vague fear brushed Noel's spine.

Even so, there were no tools to treat him. She couldn't heal the wound with Ars Magus. Noel looked around in dismay.

"Hospital... is there a hospital around here..."

But this was the outskirts of town. There was no one around and no buildings to be found. Was there a hospital in this town in the first place? Noel had doubts from there.

And then...

"Boss!!!"

"Boss!!!"

Just as she heard a voice screaming in agony, four men in matching Ikaruga-style outfits appeared from nowhere and jumped down to Noel and Bang's side. One of them pushed Noel's shoulder away, pulling her away from Bang.

Unable to react to the unexpected, Noel staggered back, and the men who appeared all at once braced themselves.

"You, that uniform is from the NOL..."

"Boss! We're here, so you'll be alright! We won't let those NOL guys do as they please anymore!"

"You! What were you doing, coming all the way down here to attack our boss!?"

"Don't tell me the NOL aren't satisfied with just destroying Ikaruga, and now you're trying to eliminate the survivors!?"

"E-excuse me, um... please wait a moment, I'm not...!"

Faced with the hostility thrust at her from all sides, Noel hesitated and took two or three steps back.

She immediately understood what they were saying. It was a complete misunderstanding; they thought that Noel was the one who had injured the man with the cross-shaped scar who had fallen over.

Noel hurriedly shook her head and appealed to them.

"I didn't hurt that man! Please submit a damage report to the branch. Then they'll investigate the matter and catch the culprit who inflicted such terrible injuries, right!"

Even if it was a personal dispute, this injury was clearly excessive. It might even be a random attack.

Noel believed that she had a duty as a soldier to investigate and arrest the perpetrator.

But the men protecting Bang glared back at Noel with even thicker hostility.

"Do you really think we'd be satisfied with such an excuse? Don't take us for fools!"

"Eh?"

What came back like a stab was a word of reproach and a strong voice of rejection.

As soon as one man opened his mouth, the other three men, as if not being able to remain silent, hurled their hostility at her.

"What damage report? Do you think people in the lower levels like us can get one!?"

"There's no way the NOL would act even if we requested an investigation in the first place!"

"To try and gloss this over with such a flimsy excuse... how despicable!"

"B-but... I..."

A flimsy excuse? She didn't mean to say that at all. Noel shook her head weakly, not knowing how to make them understand, and unable to think of any appropriate words.

At that moment, a low, thick male voice interrupted, as if cutting off the exchange between Noel and the men.

"Stop it, everyone!"

At that moment, the men who were staring at Noel all turned around at once.

Pressing down hard on the wound that was cutting through his abdomen, Bang, who had been unconscious and collapsed until then, awkwardly raised his body. The wound was still not closed, and red droplets were dripping from under his thick hand.

"B-boss! Are you alright!?"

"Boss!"

With the momentum of jumping, the men crouched down beside Bang and reached out to support his body.

While wearing a painful expression, Bang, with the help of his four subordinates, lowered his waist onto his own pool of blood. He looked up at Noel, past his subordinates who were looking at him worriedly.

"Don't misunderstand... it wasn't this woman who cut me. She was trying to help me. Even if she is a member of the NOL, to blame a weak woman alone with unfounded accusations is something that Ikaruga men should not do." Bang, without shaking his voice from the pain of his deep wound, soothed the four surrounding men with strong words. He even showed a bold smile as if to say that he didn't care about the wound. Next, he turned his gaze to Noel, also with strength.

"My lady, my subordinates were rude. I will apologize for them. I am sorry." Still sitting down, Bang lowered his head with a clear gesture. Even if he moved, the wound would probably hurt, but he no longer seemed to care.

"N-no, it's nothing, I was just a little surprised." Noel also shook her head slightly. Following Bang, the four men lowered their heads in apology one after another, which in turn made her even more embarrassed.

The subordinate who had been supporting Bang's back opened his mouth while looking around them.

"But boss, if that's the case, then who the hell did this?"

There were clear signs of a struggle around them, and several kunai, Ikaruga's unique short swords, remained stuck in the bridge.

However, there were few signs that a fierce battle had taken place. In other words, although there was certainly a battle, it was by no means a long one. Bang was cut down in a short period of time.

Perhaps aware of this, Bang grimaced and answered with a heaviness that suggested hatred, different from his previous strong and energetic appearance.

"'The Hero of Ikaruga,' Jin Kisaragi."

"Jin... Kisaragi?" It was Noel who repeated the name reflexively. Her heart pounded when she heard it. At the same time, she understood. The frozen bridge, the ice block blocking the road, Bang's body that was too cold. Jin, she was sure, possessed a sword that manipulated ice.

"Excuse me, um, just now, Jin Kisaragi... did he come here?" Stepping forward as if rushing, Noel put her hand on her chest and asked Bang.

Controlling one of his subordinates who had turned around warily, Bang looked up at Noel and nodded seriously.

"Yes. There's no way I could mistake him. That figure, that technique, and that sword. No matter what, it is none other than Jin Kisaragi."

As if glaring at the already disappeared figure, Bang deeply furrowed his brow. There was no pretense in his gaze. His gaze was so emotional that it would seem foolish to even try to find pretense in his eyes.

Tension ran through Noel's chest.

Jin was here right after Bang had fallen. How much time had passed since then, neither Noel nor Bang could accurately count. But judging by how dry the blood on the ground was, it couldn't have been that long.

"Did he say where he was going, or which way?" She didn't expect to get concrete information so quickly, especially not in a town so far down in the lower level. Conversely, with this much concrete information, she might not be able to get any more in the future.

At Noel's impatient response, Bang moved his neck as if looking backward.

"He seemed to have gone up this road... but well, I don't know his destination."

"I see..."

"I don't know if it's a clue, but he kept muttering the name 'Ragna the Bloodedge.'" As if trying to encourage the disappointed Noel, Bang spoke to her in a strong voice.

"'Ragna the Bloodedge'..." Noel pulled her chin slightly and spoke the name aloud.

It was the name of the wanted criminal that Jin was said to be pursuing. Thinking back, the last conversation Noel had with Jin was about Ragna the Bloodedge.

Jin was pursuing Ragna the Bloodedge? But why? If it was to arrest him as a soldier, there was no need to deliberately disappear.

(Was there a need... to contact him personally?)

But even then, for what purpose?

Noel knew too little about Jin to speculate. She didn't know what kind of person he was, what kind of beliefs he had. Conversations with Jin were always limited to the minimum necessary formalities, and even that was mostly one-sided. Jin always looked at Noel with cold eyes and turned his face away without saying anything. She had no way of knowing what he was thinking when he disappeared, with that cold look...

(...This is a mission. I have to find Major Kisaragi.)

Her chest felt heavy. Shaking it off, Noel straightened her posture and turned to Bang.

"Thank you for the information. I'm sorry, but I'll take my leave now." She declared sternly as a soldier of the NOL, and then relaxed her tone slightly and added, "...Please take care of your injuries. Goodbye then."

As for treatment, Bang's subordinates would be fine.

Noel bowed her head, put on her thick poncho, and turned back the way she came. The ice block was still melting and remained as it was, and she jumped over it with Ars Magus as she had when she arrived.

While climbing the narrow mountain road, Noel repeated the name many times in her mind.

Ragna the Bloodedge.

Ragna.

Why was that? She felt like she knew that name.

Of course she knew it. She had said it and heard it many times before coming here.

The most wanted criminal with the highest bounty in history. A villain feared as the "Grim Reaper."

But why?

Suddenly that name... was nostalgic.

It felt like she had known him for much longer, even before he was called the "Grim Reaper."

(No, I don't know what I'm thinking. That can't be true. Maybe I'm just confused because I'm in a strange place.)

She made excuses to herself that the place called Kagutsuchi might not suit her. It was vast, complex, and packed with so many different people and scenery that it made her head spin.

(I have to find him quickly... and go home.)

And when that time came, she would contact Tsubaki and Makoto for the first time in a while, and the three of them would go somewhere together for the first time in a long time.

So for now, she would forget about the strange longing for the name Ragna, and think only about her mission. While telling herself that, Noel hurried to the upper layer.

Watching the slender figure disappearing into the mountain path, Bang hummed with admiration.

"Well, well, I never thought I would be helped by a soldier of the Library. Even among soldiers, there are those who behave like that, huh?" Frowning sternly with his thick eyebrows, Bang nodded thoughtfully, seemingly deeply moved.

His subordinates, from the left and right, were taking his arms and slowly trying to help him stand.

"It's not the time to be impressed, boss. If you don't treat that wound soon!"

He had been keeping a calm face since earlier, but the wound that cut through Bang's body was by no means shallow. Although not as much as when he'd collapsed, it was still bleeding.

But Bang laughed heartily while pressing the wound from above his clothes.

"There's no need to worry! A wound like this is but a scratch to the brave warrior of love and justice, Bang Shishigami! Wahahahaha!"

"Really? Then it seems like we don't have to take you to Dr. Litchi's place. Then we'll take care of it..."

"What? Dr. Litchi's hospital?" Bang, who had stood up with support from both sides, stopped at the words of one of his subordinates.

One of the subordinates who had been about to walk ahead turned back and nodded. "That's right. We can't do specialized treatment ourselves. But if you say you're okay, then surely you're okay..."

"Guwaaaaa!"

Interrupting his subordinate before he could start walking towards Ronin-Gai again, Bang shouted loudly, echoing throughout the area, and fell backwards. He rolled on the ground, writhing and clutching his chest painfully.

"Guuuh... gah... I'm already... no good... Gack!"

"B-boss!"

"What's wrong!?"

"Q-quickly... as soon as possible, to Dr. Litchi's hospital..." Grabbing the chest of one of the subordinates too roughly to be called clinging... Bang suddenly lost all strength in his body and collapsed on the spot.

His subordinates surrounded him in a great flurry. Four of them desperately lifted his muscular body, then quickly carried him out of Ronin-Gai.

"P-please hold on, boss!"

"We're taking you to Dr. Litchi's place right away!"

While listening to the panicking, flustered voices of his subordinates, fearing that Bang was about to die, Bang secretly grinned. With this, as planned, he would be treated by his beloved.

Now, the image of Jin Kisaragi was no longer in Bang's mind. It was filled with thoughts of the beautiful female doctor working in Orient Town.

Chapter 3: False Hero - The Man Called Hero

1

December 30, 2199 - 23:45

The night deepened quietly under the clear silver moon.

The wind that crossed the heights was strong, making a sound like death cutting through the air. The clouds, thin and stretched out, occasionally blocked the moonlight and were easily swept away, disappearing into the sky.

The commercial district of the upper layer of Kagutsuchi was already mostly closed, with few people around, enveloped in a secretive atmosphere. The stores that operated at night were only lined up on the main street, and if you took the back streets, you could head to the city center without attracting unnecessary attention.

There were few lights and no unnecessary facilities. This was a city that was managed for order. Those who sought entertainment would go down a few levels to a place with less surveillance.

Otherwise, they would obediently return to their blessed homes and enjoy the warmth of a warm room.

The people who lived around here, whether shallow or deep, all had some kind of connection with the NOL. With the Novus Orbis Librarium's Kagutsuchi branch nearby, and many related facilities lined up around it, there were few who would choose to go out at night.

Yes. The Novus Orbis Librarium's Kagutsuchi branch was visible nearby.

"Every time I see it, it's always... a hollow figure."

In the nighttime of the upper city, a white shadow stopped and chewed.

It had a form that was like a human, but not a human. The toned body was the silhouette of a man, and he was tall. He wore a strange outfit based on white and black, not revealing a single piece of human skin. Not his fingertips, toes, not even his head.

The man in white and black had no expression. The face, which looked like it was covered with a white mask, had no eyes, nose, or mouth, and a long tuft of white hair-like things grew from his head.

On his back, he carried a sword that was abnormally long. It was one of only two in the world, a Nox Nyctores: Interfectum Malus: Ookami.

It was a weapon created during the Dark War, which began about a hundred years ago, to fight against the Black Beast.

The fact that he carried it on his back indicated that he was a hero, the owner of Ookami.

His name was Hakumen. He was one of the Six Heroes said to have taken the lead in challenging the Black Beast that rampaged to destroy humanity during the "Dark War," a war where the world once saw despair.

He was said to have gone missing immediately after the war, and since then, no one knew his whereabouts... and now, about ninety years later, the hero in white attire was in the land of Kagutsuchi.

Large, claw-like feet walked, hidden in the shadows of the dark back streets. The destination was the rumored Kagutsuchi branch of the NOL, which shone in the moonlight.

The sophisticated cityscape that led to it was nostalgic for Hakumen.

No, the word nostalgic was not enough. It was a distant memory. An old, old memory. Parts of it were blurred and painful, or torn and lost, and they would never be repaired. But someday, it was a fragment of memory that the soul certainly saw, heard, touched, and tasted.

He once walked this land in a different form than now, chasing the same man as now. And at the end of that...

"That's... a phenomenon weapon."

Suddenly, Hakumen stopped walking.

Ahead, beyond the darkness of the night, there was a known presence. A phenomenon weapon - like the Ookami on his back, it seemed that one of the weapons created during the Dark War was there.

But it was strange. The weapon that Hakumen knew was long sealed, and shouldn't exist as a Nox Nyctores. Moreover, the presence that felt like it was clinging to this thread somehow felt different from the one that was in the same battlefield in the past.

It was an uncomfortable feeling, as if he had stepped into a muddy place. This unclear feeling, even if he tried to ignore it, was persistent and clung to him.

Either way, it was the destination. Hakumen lowered his waist while facing the direction of the presence, and jumped high.

Jumping to the roof of the building beside him, he kicked off his feet as they were and went forward. Overlooking the moon, he jumped over the roofs one after another.

The moon was swelling into an almost perfect circle. Tomorrow would be a full moon.

The full moon did not bring good memories.

Jumping over the last roof, he found the owner of the presence below. If Hakumen had an expression, he would have frowned in suspicion.

A child was walking on a back street that deliberately deviated from the main street, a dark path with only the light leaking from the windows of the buildings. Although he was wearing fine clothes, the path he was walking and the time of day were completely unsuitable.

Walking alongside the child, as if accompanying him, was the owner of the déjà vu and discomfort that Hakumen felt.

Catching the night wind, Hakumen jumped down. He landed right in front of the child and the strange figure standing beside him.

"Whoa!" The child raised a voice of surprise appropriate for his age at the white intruder who had fallen from the sky. But at the same time, the way he jumped back was by no means childish.

As Hakumen recognized from a distance, he was a boy in fine clothes. A purple outfit with a cloak of the same color and a top hat. Behind the round glasses, there were eyes that seemed to be of good birth nestled in the eye sockets, but the emotions there were strangely uneasy.

Was it because of the figure beside him? Hakumen straightened his posture from the landing position and turned his face to the tall figure who had stepped out in front of the boy, instead of the boy.

It was a mechanical doll.

Although it was modeled after a woman in a purple dress, it was clear at a glance that it wasn't human. The inorganic and metallic texture, the face that looked like a mere creation, the arms that were too long and looked like sturdy gauntlets, and the sharp claws lined up instead of fingers.

"Nox Nyctores... Deus Machina: Nirvana." In a muffled voice under the mask, Hakumen spoke the doll's name.

At that moment, murderous intent gushed out from the boy like a spray. His wide-open blue eyes harbored a dangerous light, and he stared at Hakumen as if challenging him without fear. The hand he held out, as if protecting the mechanical doll standing one step behind him, could be seen as if he were bracing himself.

"I don't know who you are, but I don't know anyone by that name. I'm Carl Clover, and this is my sister, Ada. There's no one named Nirvana here." The boy, who identified himself as Carl in an innocent but hostile voice, told Hakumen. But immediately, as if called by someone, he turned around sharply. What he looked up at through his large glasses was the mechanical doll he called his sister.

"Huh? What's wrong, sister?" Carl behaved as if he could hear the voice of the doll behind him.

Hakumen's ears could not hear the voice of the mechanical doll Nirvana. Even if there were other people in this place, they would probably not be able to hear it.

The voice of his sister whispering to him was only heard by Carl. Whether it was really Nirvana's voice or not was another matter.

"This person..."

While turning his ear to his sister, Carl looked at Hakumen with caution. They were not the eyes of a child. His eyes, which were both ruthless and aggressive, as well as intelligent, observed Hakumen closely. Soon, the boy found an answer and frowned with his handsome eyebrows as if doubting his own eyes.

"That body... and the odachi on your back... could it be the Interfectum Malus: Ookami? Then you're... Hakumen of the Six Heroes?" Carl's tone, which suggested that he had some knowledge of Ookami and the Six Heroes, made him feel like he had a level of education beyond his years.

Why such a boy was with this doll was unclear to Hakumen.

"Child, that doll is a Nox Nyctores. Touching it demands a corresponding burden from the user. Even if it's Nirvana, it will be too much poison for a young mind." Hakumen spoke calmly without returning any of the hostility or murderous intent that were directed at him.

A Nox Nyctores is not just a weapon. In the past, each weapon had its own "individuality," and in order to wield its power, it interfered with the user's mind to draw out even more power, making it a semi-living weapon.

The Ookami that Hakumen possessed, and the Nirvana over there, had sealed their "individuality," so there wasn't as much burden as during the war. Even so, possessing a Nox Nyctores meant that the mind was being eroded and interfered with every day.

Unless one had a stronger mental strength than necessary, or something that could replace it, it was difficult not only to handle, but to even maintain a sane mind.

"Then, what are you trying to say?" Carl glared at Hakumen with an upward glance and an unsettling voice. The well-mannered face he had been trying to maintain was now abandoned, and he was measuring the distance between himself and Hakumen with an uneasy calmness.

"What I do is none of your business. What's wrong with siblings being together in the first place?" Carl's tone was slightly different from a child's tantrum or selfishness. It was more insightful and calm.

"You understand, and yet you say you will follow it?" Hakumen muttered to himself.

He could see that the boy named Carl understood that the doll he called his sister, Nirvana, was a Nox Nyctores. That being together was bizarre to others. That being together put a strain on his mind. However, it was doubtful how truly he felt the sense of crisis that he might be ruined as a result.

"You have a rude way of speaking for someone who's supposed to be one of the Six Heroes." Carl grimaced unhappily.

Without being moved by his desperate glare, Hakumen asked again. "Where did you get it?"

That which should have been sealed long ago.

"I have no obligation to answer. Please move out of the way. If you are going to interfere with us, even if you are Hakumen, one of the Six Heroes... I will not forgive you."

As if to show that there was no falsehood in those words, Carl clenched his hand wrapped in a white glove tightly. Seemingly induced by Carl's will, Nirvana slid forward several steps, and then, as he had been done to her earlier, she stood to protect her little master behind her back.

"Sister?" That seemed to be different from what Carl had intended, and the boy looked up at his sister in bewilderment. The inorganic sister stood motionless in front of Carl, lightly opening both arms as if to block the way. The face with lowered metallic eyelids had no eyes, but a quiet gaze stared at Hakumen.

Carl knew that if he jumped out, Hakumen would draw the odachi on his back without hesitation and fight back.

Nirvana probably understood that. Or perhaps it was a memory.

From behind Nirvana, who was trying to protect her master by shielding him, Carl, unable to grasp the situation, raised his voice in agitation.

"What's wrong, sister!? Can you hear me!? ...Y-you, what did you do to my sister!?" His expression, which had been so calm until then, changed drastically. His eyes narrowed and he showed intense anger. But Nirvana firmly held Carl back, preventing him from moving even a step forward.

As if measuring the distance, Nirvana took a step back. Following her, Hakumen grabbed his odachi.

At that moment, Nirvana, with a sudden movement that ignored breathing, grabbed Carl as if snatching him up, and jumped up to the roof. Immediately, she avoided the moonlight and chose the darkness, running from the roof to the alley, and then dashing towards the main street and disappearing.

Soon the presence moved away, and eventually blended into the lights of the city.

"Did they get away?" Hakumen took his hand off the odachi.

If they went to a crowded place, it would be difficult to chase them. If they were found by the NOL soldiers, who would be suitable for maintaining security, there would be various troubles.

Besides... it seemed that another person had come whom he'd have to deal with.

When the presence of the Nox Nyctores disappeared and the quiet night air descended again, this time the fragrance of flowers mixed in and danced there.

Hakumen turned around. A small whirlwind danced in front of him, and as if a flower bud blossomed and opened, the scent of roses overflowed in that place. At the same time, a girl appeared, crossing the space.

With golden hair and red eyes, wearing a gorgeous black dress, and appearing with a parasol with a cat's face and a red, round familiar, it was the summoned ghost in the form of a girl, Rachel Alucard.

Leaning the umbrella she held in both hands on her small shoulder and looking at Hakumen diagonally, Rachel let out a chuckle and a provocative smile.

"It's been a while, Mr. Hero."

"Harlequin."

To Rachel, who called out to him teasingly, Hakumen replied in a low voice, faintly showing his disgust.

But Rachel directed a smile like a sneer at Hakumen's quiet, threatening spirit, and turned her umbrella around.

"You seem to have plenty of time on your hands. To be meddling with a passing phenomenon weapon..."

"It's none of your business."

"Do you remember the old you, the one who was trapped by the Nox Nyctores?"

The old you. At those mischievous words, Hakumen turned towards Rachel.

Perhaps his reaction was amusing, Rachel put a white fingertip to her lips and let out a laugh like the rustling of clothes.

"Oh, how terrible. Is it true?"

"A Nox Nyctores is not something that should be left in human history... That is the only reason."

All of the Nox Nyctores should have been destroyed immediately after the end of the Dark War. It was hard to believe that they still remain in this world.

But even that was probably nothing more than a foolish sentiment for this cunning vampire.

Even now, perhaps thinking that Hakumen's excuse was a poor one, she did not stop her mocking gaze.

"It's not just the phenomenon weapon. This city is also nostalgic, isn't it? I wonder how long ago it was for you. The memory of you, as Jin Kisaragi, wandering Kagutsuchi with a different sword than you have now, and fighting your brother deep underground..."

"Harlequin." Hakumen stopped Rachel, who spoke like a rolling bell, in a heavy tone. He had no intention of listening any further. "I have discarded that name. My name is Hakumen. From the time you led me to this forest and made it mine, I have only been myself. No one else."

Not now. Not in this place. Hakumen was certainly a young man with a different name. But that is exactly what "not the current dimension" means.

"You, on the other hand, are quite eloquent this time. You, a mere bystander who knows everything but does not lift a finger, are able to line up words so skillfully." Hakumen retorted, mixing in a sound that could be taken as a snort or a sneer.

Rachel, while hooking her short hair behind her small ear, smiled with a composed face. It was a mature, bewitching smile that made one forget for a moment that she was a girl in appearance.

"That's right. As you say, I am a 'bystander.' In other words, I am an 'audience' of this story. The audience can throw jeers from the outside, but they cannot change the content of the stage, can they? Even if I am shown the same stage many times."

"Nonsense."

But Hakumen also understands that this is the truth.

The vampire is a bystander who can only watch the scene. A spectator who has no choice but to watch the way fate continues to roll.

But Hakumen does not even think for a moment that he will be content with that infinitely powerless position. If there are skillful hands, he will not stop pulling them, and if there are feet to step on, he will not stop struggling. He is determined to fight as long as this body can move.

Hakumen put his hand on his mask and bowed deeply. After a moment of silence, he released his hand and turned his back to Rachel.

"You can stay there and enjoy the show as long as you like. I will cut off the world in my own way."

"You can't do it, Mr. Hero."

"Even if I can't, my sword is in my hand."

The logic was enough.

Even as Hakumen walked away, shaking the silver tufts hanging from his head, Rachel did not stop him. As if she thought that even stopping him was too much of a jeer for a spectator.

The night wind was cold, and the swirling sound high in the sky seemed to be a sign of something.

But without feeling any emotion at the sound, Hakumen walked along the dark back streets.

The destination was the magnificent Novus Orbis Librarium Kagutsuchi branch. Underneath that... he intended to wait for him.

2

December 30, 2199 - 23:45

The cold wind of midnight carried the clouds and hid the moon.

But from here, the closest place to the sky in all of Kagutsuchi, most of the way the clouds flow was an event at his feet.

Novus Orbis Librarium Kagutsuchi branch. The rooftop was usually unused and empty, with nothing on it.

The fact that there was not even a single handrail despite being at the highest height was because it was not originally a place where one should set foot.

But there, tonight, was the figure of a man.

"Well, then. I guess this is about it." Hazama of the Intelligence Department muttered in a nonchalant, drawn-out tone.

Hazama, who had been crouching on the empty circular stage-like rooftop, stood up while lightly brushing his hands.

As expected, the wind was strong just because of the altitude. Hazama took out a palm-sized communication device from his suit's inner pocket, easily operated something with his knobby fingers, and firmly held his hat so that it would not be blown away by the wind.

The communication device, which was put to his ear, repeated a boring ringing tone.

He was kept waiting for a few seconds. Soon the ringing tone stopped, and a clicking sound rang in his ear, followed by a voice responding.

"It's me." It was a low and lustrous male voice. However, there was no trace of emotion in that voice, and it made a completely bland sound on flat ground. Hazama's smile deepened at the sound of the voice, and put his hat on even more carefully.

"Ah, it's Hazama. Thank you for your hard work. I'm sorry to bother you at this late hour."

"Are the preparations complete?" Whether he heard Hazama's voice or not, the person on the other end of the phone asked emotionlessly, as if he did not care at all about the words spoken to him.

"Good grief." Hazama could not help but shake his head. He was always like this. "Seriously, you're as impatient as ever. You could at least return a proper greeting! It's a basic rule for a working adult, you know?"

"Is it done?" He apparently had no intention of listening. It was a truly typical response from the other party in the communication. Hazama shrugged his shoulders. The sharply ringing wind cut through the clouds behind him and disappeared somewhere.

"Yes, it's done. Everything is ready. Well... I don't know if this will be useful, though." Saying that, Hazama looked up at the sky. A cold moon was shining beyond the clouds that were flowing at an incredible speed. Perhaps it would be a full moon tomorrow?

At the composed round face that he looked down from that height, Hazama gave a derisive sigh.

"After this, we'll be observing the situation here... what will you do? If you have anything else you want me to do, please tell me now. Tomorrow, I have to monitor a certain lieutenant, you know."

The person on the other end of the communication suddenly gave him errands sometimes, which was troublesome.

As if to make sure, Hazama confirmed, and the other party replied after a few seconds, seemingly without interest.

"Nothing in particular for now... let me know if there's anything."

"Understood. Then, I'll take my leave. Colonel Relius Clover." The communication was cut off with a small sound.

Sliding the silent communicator back into his suit's inner pocket, Hazama turned his back on the empty space of the rooftop and started walking.

As he walked, the heels of his hard leather shoes clicking on the rooftop floor, a voice spoke to his consciousness.

"Well, well, tomorrow is the real show, Hazama."

The voice was sticky, unpleasant, sarcastic, and seemed to be making fun of him.

That way of speaking would sometimes grate on people's nerves and irritate them. But for Hazama, who heard that voice closer than anyone else, his foul mouth and attitude weren't something to be concerned about.

While walking with a nonchalant and frivolous gait, Hazama lowered the corners of his eyebrows greatly with a wry smile.

"Oh dear, it was quite a task, really. But when I think about how many times there have been patterns where I've worked hard on this and that, and then everything is ruined at the very end... it's just depressing to even imagine it."

"That's right, that's right? I'm having a hard time, you know?" The owner of the voice spoke with an exaggeratedly bored tone. Hazama listened to it and smiled wryly.

But there was only Hazama on the rooftop. There wasn't even a sign of someone else.

Even so, while strangely conversing with someone, Hazama returned to the inside of the branch.

There was still nothing on the rooftop where Hazama said he had "prepared" something. However, the moon illuminated the lonely scene in a somewhat ominous way.

December 31, 2199 - 13:05

After walking through a disgusting sewer for a long time and crawling out of a narrow exit, the sky was already dyed in the color of night.

The proper air that he inhaled after several hours was the kind of clean air that was typical of the upper city, which in turn made him feel sick.

The people who live above would probably faint immediately if they inhaled the air of the lower level. He couldn't help but think that sarcastically.

Fortunately, it was late and there were almost no people around, and if he chose a dark road, he could walk around without anyone watching him.

Avoiding shopping streets and residential areas, Ragna went as far as possible to escape to the city's outskirts. What he sought is a place where he could rest his body.

The journey of several hours through the bad roads from Orient Town to the Kaka tribe's village, and from there through the sewer to the upper layer, had taken its toll on his body. Tonight, he would rest his body for the time being, and aim for the NOL branch tomorrow night.

Having decided so, he wandered around the corner of the upper layer where no one was around. It was already past midnight when he finally found a warehouse that seemed to be unused and rolled into it.

There was something like a natural park nearby, and the warehouse he found seemed to be a forgotten relic of some building that used to be here. The lock was only a simple one, and he forced it open and entered.

The inside was dusty enough to make him cough lightly as soon as he opened it, but after ventilating it for a while and mixing it with the clean air that the upper layer provided, the dusty warehouse was more comfortable for Ragna.

The warehouse wasn't very large, but it wasn't extremely small either. It was enough space for a man of Ragna's size to lean his back against the wall, stretch his legs, and sleep overnight. It also helped that there were few things in it, as it was not used.

He often slept outdoors. Tonight's sleeping place, with a roof, walls, and floor, and most important, privacy, was quite good.

Avoiding people's eyes, he closed the door. Faint moonlight seeps in through a small gap, drawing a pale blue line in the warehouse.

Crossing it, Ragna sat down. He took off the sword that he had been lowering and placed it beside him, then leaned his head against the cold, simple wall and used it as a pillow.

"Hah...I don't know..." As soon as he settled down, a deep sigh escaped and his shoulders dropped. Looking back, he had hardly walked on a proper road all day today.

(No wonder I'm tired...) Ragna thought vaguely while looking at the streak of moonlight that passed through the floor and his knees.

Tomorrow, on the other hand, he would be walking on roads that were too proper. He would go through the upper city and break into the NOL's branch.

The time was always at night. During the day, many people enter and exit the branch.

He had no feelings of hesitation or consideration towards the NOL, but he didn't want to involve innocent people who happened to be there. He didn't want to make a fuss and attract people's attention.

On the contrary, it was honestly refreshing to see the NOL's people being wary at night, and yet being caught off guard and flustered. He hoped that they would never have a peaceful night.

"NOL, huh..."
No matter how much fatigue weighed on him, that name alone stirred Ragna's heart. A scorching heat spread from the depths of his body, stirring Ragna's fighting spirit.

It was the same even now. The light in his eyes, which should have been relaxed to rest his body, was completely lit with the fire of hostility, and his large teeth, which were clenched as if trying to suppress the impulsive outburst, bit down on his senses.

For Ragna, the NOL was the target of all the hatred that arose. It was hostility, murderous intent, and all the harm he could think of.

The root of this was seven years ago. The day when the church of the sister who raised them was attacked and burned down... it had been firmly burned into Ragna's heart and memory, and would never be erased.

3

When he opened his eyes, the area had been raining for some time.

The soil under his face was wet and smelled suffocating. But more than that, the smell of burnt wood was lingering around, and he almost coughed from the non-existent smoke in the area.

The fire was out. The rain must have put it out.

In Ragna's hazy vision, the unrecognizable, unsightly form of the church, which had been roaring and burning just a while ago, remained.

"Too late... rain..." Powerless lips trembled in a voice that could not be heard.

The white wall where he used to throw mud balls and get scolded was nowhere to be seen. Neither was the pointed roof, nor the simple cross that stood on top of it, nor the small skylight that allowed the morning sun to enter.

Only a few charred, pillar-like sticks were standing here and there, looking forlornly at the sky.

The rain must have been falling for a long time. Ragna's body, rolling on the ground, was completely soaked, his clothes were heavy with absorbed rainwater, as if his whole body was being pressed down by something.

He couldn't move his arms or legs. His body was cold and his senses were distant, and he wasn't sure if he was alive or dead.

Ragna's right arm was missing. He was blown away without knowing why by a shadowy man who attacked the border. There was a deep stab wound on his back. It was a wound inflicted by Ragna's younger brother, who was standing next to the shadowy man, with a sword.

Those were the only two major wounds, but how much blood had been lost while he was unconscious? How much of his life had Ragna lost while the church burned down and the rain extinguished the fire?

It was not all due to the rain that his body would not move or that he had no sensation. Even if it had not rained, Ragna's body would not have moved, and sensation would not have been left.

Like the embers smoldering at the edge of the charcoal being extinguished by the rain, Ragna's life was about to be extinguished.

He felt that it was over.

The church was burned down. The sister was dead. His younger brother and sister were taken away... and eventually Ragna's life would be lost.

(Sister, Jin, Saya!)

The call remained in his heart. There was not even the strength left to engrave it on his lips.

He was going to die. Without knowing anything, without being able to do anything. While being stained with blood and dirt between the rain and mud, he would die as he was taken away.

Prompted by the sensation that seemed to be crawling up from his fingertips, his eyelids slowly closed... at that moment. Suddenly, the rain moved away.

"How unsightly." A voice was heard. It was a woman's voice. He didn't recognize it. But that voice gave Ragna a little strength.

(Who is it?)

That question made Ragna lift his eyelids. He couldn't move his neck or chin, but his eyeballs moved. Rolling his eyeballs in their sockets, Ragna searched for the owner of the voice.

She was there.

Right next to Ragna's turning head.

Wearing thick-soled shoes and a black dress with fluttering hem, a girl was standing with a large bat umbrella. She was about the same age as his younger sister. She looked a little over ten years old. The ribbon that stood upright, tying up her long golden hair, looked like rabbit ears.

The rain was gone because Ragna's head was under the shadow of her umbrella.

"Shall I watch you die like this? It's lonely to die alone, isn't it?" Whether she was serious or joking, the girl with the umbrella spoke to Ragna in a calm tone.

Ragna could only respond to that question with a faint breath. However, he did not avert his eyes.

He couldn't bear to be in grief, cry out, or despair in front of this child. He didn't want to die while being pitied.

How long had they been doing this, exchanging glances and staring at each other? The girl's eyes were a deep red color that suited the silhouette of the rabbit-eared ribbon. The crimson eyes eventually asked.

"Or do you want an arm to stand up?"

"Uh... wha...?" His throat reflexively trembled, squeezing out a voice.

The girl nodded.

"You've lost it, haven't you? Here... you can get anything you want if you wish." The girl's voice was both teasing and cold.

Not understanding what she was saying, Ragna just glared at the girl. If he could get anything he wanted, what would he want? Such a thing crossed his mind in a corner of his dull thoughts.

(...I want power.)

He thrust his fingertips, which had not moved even a bit, into the wet soil.

(I want power... power that no one can beat.)

He wanted the power to rush to the sister's aid and protect her.

He wanted the power to bring back his deranged brother's consciousness.

He wanted the power to keep anyone from touching his unconscious sister.

He wanted the power to keep anyone, anything, from being taken from him.

If he only had that, he could have protected them. He should have been able to protect them.

Ragna's hand clenched the soil tightly. His nails were about to peel off and he felt a dull pain. The pain revived his senses.

His lost right arm was hot. His stabbed back was hot. The breath and blood he exhaled were hot.

Regret and powerlessness were hot inside him.

Suddenly, he heard a sound like a beast's growl in his ear. The moment he realized it was his own breath, Ragna's body suddenly disappeared.

"What?"

In that instant, he didn't understand what had happened. But when he saw the girl's shoes, which should have been in front of him, suddenly rising, he somehow understood.

The ground under Ragna collapsed and broke, swallowing him.

There was nothing he could do about the sudden fall, and Ragna fell into the abyss.

While feeling instinctive fear at the fall as if being sucked in, Ragna heard the girl's voice whispering the moment he fell.

"Besides, whether you wish it or not, fate will not change." The girl's voice was the last thing Ragna heard, and he lost consciousness in the fall.

Consciousness returned not long after the fall. But whether that consciousness was the real world or a dream, Ragna couldn't tell.

The first thing he recognized was darkness. It was pitch black all around, and only the hard ground was something he could trust. Trying to get up, he rubbed his hand on the ground. From the sensation, it seemed to be soil or rock.

(Damn it...)

He couldn't get up because he had no strength. He was already missing one arm to support his body on the ground. There was no way he could lift his body, which was heavy and unable to move.

Even so, he couldn't just lie there, and Ragna clung to the ground with his remaining arm and dragged his body forward. He didn't know what was in that direction. He didn't know if he should've moved forward. But he couldn't just lie there without doing anything.

That girl had said, "If you wish, you can get it."

(Anything is fine... any form is fine.)

That was what he wanted.

Forward, forward. In the darkness where he didn't even know if there was an end, he crawled forward.

Ragna soon reached a wall. It seemed that his eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness, and he could see that there was a dirt wall there.

Something strange was protruding from that wall. Was it a statue? Or... a corpse? It was a black mass that had completely dyed everything while taking the shape of a human body.

The body was in the shape of a man. It looked as if he was kneeling on the ground, drooping his arms limply beside his body. But that black body had no head. From the middle of the neck up, it looked as if a sharp blade had been used to cut it off in a single stroke.

It was a grotesque object. But for some reason, Ragna couldn't take his eyes off it.

Again, he heard something like a beast's growl. This time it was not the breath he exhaled. It echoed deep in his ears, as if a hallucination.

"...Power."

This is the one who will give it to me.

Thinking this, Ragna stretched out his remaining hand while crawling on the ground. The moment his fingertips touched it, the black headless object suddenly collapsed, turning into black sand or mist. As it was, it swallowed Ragna without giving him a chance to breathe.

Ragna's body and consciousness were instantly snatched away by the black particles. And once again, he lost his memory.

When he felt stillness and opened his eyes next, Ragna's body had a right arm. However, it was not an arm with a human-like color that he originally had. It was black... a pitch-black arm, like the darkness that had gushed out at that time had been woven and solidified.

And Ragna's right eye, looking down at that arm, had changed to a sinister red.

Seeing the black arm, the rabbit-like girl taught Ragna.

"That's good. That is the Azure Grimoire. It should lend you power that surpasses anything. But be careful. That is not your arm. It is not the real you. So never think that the Azure Grimoire is your own power."

After obtaining a new arm, Ragna's life was no longer as peaceful as it had been when he was in the church.

In place of the sister, a beastkin took over as Ragna's guardian. He was only as tall as Ragna's waist, and his two-tone black and white fur gave him the appearance of a bipedal cat. His large eyes were red, and the tail extending to his back was forked at the tip.

His name was Jubei. When Ragna heard that name for the first time, he doubted his ears.

Jubei was the name of one of the Six Heroes who fought against the Black Beast in the Dark War. He had heard many stories and anecdotes about his exploits from the sister. He had heard them much more richly than old tales and lullabies.

When he learned he was the real Jubei, one of the Six Heroes, he felt surprised and admired him. He felt a little proud when he heard that the Six Heroes were old friends with the sister.

But in reality, the life that began under Jubei... was so harsh that any envy was blown away somewhere.

"Guhoah!"

Blown away by an impact that was like being gouged out along with a dull sound, Ragna crashed into a tree trunk that should have been several meters behind him and stopped. When he fell face down on the ground with a thud, green leaves that had fallen from the impact rained down on him as if pitying him.

Several years had passed since Ragna had been attacked at the church, fell underground, survived, and began living with Jubei. It was several years of harsh training under Jubei.

He learned the art of fighting, the skills and knowledge to survive in the forests and mountains, the history of the world, and the current world situation. And about how to use the black right arm - the "Azure Grimoire."

Among them, fighting techniques were particularly strict and thorough... and sometimes he was gleefully beaten day and night.

Even now, he was in the middle of such sword training. He was given a sword and told to show him a single strike, but he was brilliantly challenged by Jubei's two small branches, and as a result, he was defeated by a powerful kick.

"Oh, damn it! You're hopping around!" Brushing off the leaves, Ragna jumped up and slammed the ground with his fist, revealing his irritation. Beside him, a practice sword given to him by Jubei was rolling around.

It was unadorned and very ordinary, but it was real, not blunt. If the tip grazed, it could even brush off the tip of a cat's hair, and it should be easy to cut down a small branch.

"Are you hurt, Ragna?"

A small figure came through the bushes, which were warped by Ragna's body. It was Jubei, a large bipedal cat and Ragna's master. He glanced at his disciple's face without any disturbance in his posture.

His expression looked cheerful for no reason, and Ragna sat down and looked up at his teacher sullenly.

"You should have warned me a little before you did that. You just blew me away."

"What are you talking about? I've been quite lenient. If I were serious, it wouldn't be training for you." Jubei laughed and shrugged his shoulders, as if Ragna had just told a joke. Ragna couldn't continue, so he groaned and kept silent.

As expected of one of the Six Heroes, Jubei was very strong. Over the past few years, Ragna had been training desperately to catch up with him, but just when he thought he had gotten closer, Jubei was somehow farther away, and he didn't feel like he was catching up at all. He no longer thought that he might be able to become as strong as this little cat man.

Recently, he had been struggling to narrow the gap between himself and his master, which he finally realized was too big. But no matter how many times he was reminded and made aware of his own abilities, there was always impatience and eagerness inside Ragna. It was an emotion that was always stuck inside Ragna, and it always tormented him. If he were to give it a name in simple words, it would be "hatred."

Training after training, discipline after discipline. Through all of it, Ragna had never forgotten about that night when everything was taken from him.

"...Hey, master." Trying to stand up, he stopped once, and leaned his back against the tree trunk while sitting with one knee raised. Jubei calmly watched the situation, wagging his tail leisurely.

"What is it, Ragna?"

"When will I be able to go and crush the NOL?" The tone of the question was disguised with a casual, everyday one, but deep down, there was an anger that threatened to burn up at any moment.

Without realizing it, Ragna's hand was clenched with such force that it seemed to be cutting into his palm.

After being taken away from the church, Jin seemed to have been taken in by a family called the Kisaragi family and was living as an adopted child.

The Kisaragi family was said to be a noble class called the "Duodecim" belonging to an organization called the Novus Orbis Librarium. He didn't remember the details, but in any case, he was being educated to become a soldier as the child of a prestigious family.

On the other hand, Saya's whereabouts after being taken away by the NOL were unknown. All that was known is that she seemed to be hidden in the center of the organization... or so it seems.

All of this information was what he had heard from Jubei.

In between training with Ragna, Jubei would occasionally slip out, no one knew when he had the time, and run around here and there for investigations.

According to Ragna's only source of information, the name of the shadowy man who attacked their church was Terumi. He was one of the Six Heroes like Jubei, and currently belonged to the NOL under a different name and status.

As a result of taking in the story about that church incident, Ragna had come to the following conclusion. It was the Novus Orbis Librarium that took the church, the sister, Jin, Saya, and everything from Ragna...

Terumi and Jin both had the existence of the NOL behind them. If the NOL retrieved Saya, then it was also the NOL that made such a cruel decision in search of Saya.

It was difficult to hold many grudges. Each one was dispersed and became fragmented within themselves. That was why Ragna bundled the hatred within him under the name of the NOL. With just that one, he could move with hatred as much as he wanted.

"It's still too early. Do you wanna die for nothing?" Jubei sighed and answered bitterly.

Ragna knew his master would say that. They had repeated this exchange many times. But even so, he couldn't help but ask. He wanted to shatter that target of hatred as soon as possible, not even a second sooner.

"I know I can't beat you yet, Master, but I've gotten a lot stronger, haven't I!? Those NOL guys aren't gonna stand a chance against me, even if they come at me all at once!"

Unable to swallow his anger, Ragna punched the tree trunk he had been leaning against, and stood up with that momentum. When Ragna stood up, he looked down at Jubei. The red cat eyes that looked up at him from below showed deep understanding, but also sternly watched his disciple.

"If you can't defeat me, you won't be able to crush the NOL."

"But-"

"'You won't know until you try'?"

Suddenly, a third voice cut into the conversation between Ragna and Jubei.

At the same time, a rose-scented breeze blew around. What appeared was a graceful girl with long golden hair tied with an upright ribbon. It was the vampire Rachel Alucard, the girl who appeared before Ragna in the pouring rain at the ruins of a burned-down church.

The sight of the girl in a gorgeous black dress standing against the backdrop of the forest, where the seithr was thick and the air was gloomy, was truly mismatched and strange.

But she didn't care about such a thing, and when she closed the bat umbrella she was holding, she made a gesture as if she was sitting in the air. In response to that movement, the familiar, which was the bat umbrella, changed its shape and became a relaxed sofa, receiving the noble princess.

Leaning on the black sofa that appeared in the forest, Rachel chuckled and laughed at Ragna teasingly.

"There are many things in this world that you can know without even trying. It might be something too complex for your limited mind to understand."

What she said was probably correct, but Ragna's irritation quickly grew at her utterly condescending tone.

"How do you know if you haven't even tried it!"

"Because you're weak." Rachel immediately responded with the sharpness of a knife.

Beside her, a red rubber ball-like familiar, Gii, jumped up and busily flapped its wings while laughing mischievously.

"Weak, weak!"

"Huh!?"

"Eek!" As Ragna stepped forward with a frightening expression, Gii easily dodged and hid behind the sofa where Rachel was sitting.

Letting out a disappointed sigh at the pathetic familiar's scream, Rachel rested her cane on the sofa. She lightly placed a finger on her white cheek and gave another disappointed sigh to the other person standing in front of her.

"All you can do is vent your anger on such a small creature. With that fragile spirit and body of yours… you'll be easily eaten." As if telling a ghost story to scare a child, Rachel narrowed her red eyes and whispered. She wasn't good at inducing fear. Ragna frowned while taking half a step back, intimidated by the eerie aura that Rachel exuded more than the content of her words.

"Eaten?"

"By your right arm."

Told so bewitchingly, Ragna reflexively turned his gaze to his right arm. From the middle of his upper arm, his arm was dyed jet black, not the color of a human arm. On top of that, a belt-shaped seal was wrapped around it in a spiral pattern.

Rachel and Jubei called that arm the Azure Grimoire.

A grimoire was a key necessary to use Ars Magus, and although it was called a book, it didn't necessarily take the form of a book. Ragna's arm, while taking the form of a human arm, was said to be a grimoire, not an arm.

It was too difficult a story for Ragna, who didn't understand the concept of Ars Magus in the first place, but the precautions that Rachel and Jubei repeatedly said were ingrained in his head, beyond understanding.

Never think of the Azure Grimoire as your own power.

It is merely a grimoire, not your own arm.

Ragna, honestly, did not understand what that meant. But from the overly sincere appearance of his two guardians, he understood that it was something that should never be viewed optimistically.

Jubei spoke to his disciple, who was staring down at his black arm, in a gentle yet strong tone.

"You have to become stronger, much stronger. So that you can walk on your own with your own power. So that you can carve out a path without relying on that right arm."

"When will that be?"

It wouldn't be a matter of today or tomorrow. Next year, the year after next. No, it was still far away. He was deeply aware of his own weakness.

Jubei laughed cheerfully at Ragna, who had become sullen. It was a pleasant laugh that didn't contain any sarcasm, and it had the power to instantly blow away the darkness that clouded Ragna's heart.

"That depends on your efforts. Now. The break is over. Next, I'll attack you, so try to dodge everything!" Saying that, Jubei snatched the sword from Ragna's hand. The tip of the sword flashed and scattered a few strands of Ragna's hair. In an instant, Ragna's blood ran cold.

"Hey, you're kidding, right!? Are you trying to kill me!?"

"Don't worry, I'll stop before you die. Now, let's go!"

"Whoa, wait, wait, please wait, Master!"

The sound of the wind mercilessly cutting through the air ran left and right. If he stopped, he wouldn't get away with it. Ragna desperately dodged the sword that was swung down vertically and turned around, fleeing from the spot like a rabbit.

In a forgotten warehouse on the outskirts of the upper layers of Kagutsuchi, the 13th Hierarchical City, Ragna stretched out his right arm, as if offering it to the moonlight that seeped in through the gaps, and gazed at it.

"The Azure Grimoire..."

It had the form of a human arm itself, and he could make it move in any way he wished with his own will, yet it was a black mass that wasn't his own arm.

It felt like it had been a long time since he spoke that name.

It was said to be the strongest grimoire.

Ragna had been helped by the power of this grimoire several times, and he certainly thought it was worthy of being called the strongest.

The destructive power it could unleash was so merciless that Ragna couldn't bring himself to use it unless he was cornered to a great extent.

When he used it, something surged up. Perhaps it could be called a destructive impulse. Something that seemed like himself but not himself overflowed from within him and seemed to swallow him up.

"You'll be eaten."

He recalled those words that Rachel spoke sometime ago.

This arm was said to be both a grimoire and a mass of seithr. That seithr constantly drained life force from the surroundings and sent it to Ragna.

Thanks to this, Ragna had acquired the convenient ability to quickly recover from injuries, but as a result, he had been given the troublesome trait of unconsciously absorbing the life force of others when he stayed in the same place with someone for a long time.

He wondered what would happen to him if the grimoire's owner was "eaten" by that life-force-absorbing seithr.

What came to his mind was Arakune, the monster he saw in the sewer a few hours ago. Litchi, the doctor who also approached the Boundary, had said it was the transformed body of a researcher who had gotten too close to the Boundary.

(Will I... become like that someday...?)

Ragna threw the black arm on his lap and looked at it through the gaps in his closing eyelids.

(Well... it doesn't really matter.)

If he could crush the NOL and settle everything with his brother, his sister, and the man named Terumi. Then, it didn't matter if he became a demon or a monster. Once everything was settled, that's when Ragna would lose everything.

(I'm sleepy...)

He had to sleep and regain his strength. Tomorrow would be busy.

It was very quiet here. He could clearly hear his own breathing, which was gradually deepening.

(Come to think of it... I feel like this happened before...) Ragna thought vaguely as he drifted to sleep.

(Have I been to Kagutsuchi before...?)

He didn't think so. But strangely, he could smoothly map out the route from the upper levels to the branch in his mind.

It was a strange feeling. He must be half-dreaming. Thinking that, Ragna closed his eyelids.

As his vision closed, Ragna exhaled deeply. And before even a minute had passed, he began to breathe regularly, his chest rising and falling in sleep.

...I had a dream.

It was a dream from when I was little. A dream when I had a cold.

Even though I was covered with a fluffy blanket and futon, my body was trembling slightly. It was hard to breathe, and when I took a deep breath, my chest wheezed and I coughed. I felt chills, but my body was hot and my head was dizzy.

It was such a nice day. I wanted to play outside. I thought about that while looking at the window by the bed.

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door.

"Who is it?" I replied.

Then the door was gently opened as if to check the situation, and a boy came in.

He was a boy with golden hair and green eyes. But because I was feverish, his vision was blurred and I couldn't see his face clearly.

The boy walked carefully to the bedside and pulled up a chair to sit next to me.

"Are you okay?" The boy peered at me and spoke with concern. It was a gentle voice. That voice brought a sense of relief to my chest, and my labored breathing eased a little.

Taking the towel that was placed on my forehead, the boy put his palm on it instead and measured the heat. After a while, he grimaced as if in trouble.

"Your fever is quite high. Are you alright?" At his question, I weakly nodded from the bed. Actually, I wasn't in that much pain anymore. Just having him by my side made me so happy.

But if I answered that I was alright, I felt like he would say "then" and leave the room. So, I was a little selfish.

I wanted him to stay with me longer.

The boy dipped the towel in the wooden bucket at the bedside, wrung it out again with cold water, and placed it back on my forehead. Then, he gently stroked my head.

"Don't worry, you'll get better soon. I'll be here, so rest assured and get some sleep. Okay?"

"Yeah... brother."

Gently spoken to, I nodded this time with a big nod.

If he's going to be here, I'm relieved. With that thought, I closed my eyelids as if invited by the warmth of his hand stroking my hair.

In a peacefulness like taking a nap after a warm bath, I wished this time would last forever, and then I fell into a gentle sleep.

December 31, 2199 - 13:53

The afternoon of the last day of the year was pleasantly sunny.

Noel, who had somehow managed to return to the upper layer late at night, left the NOL facility where she had been lent a bed and went up two more levels, continuing her search mission for Major Jin Kisaragi, which she had been doing yesterday.

She had searched the likely places in the lower level one by one. But despite many eyewitness accounts, she couldn't reach Jin. However, she should have been following his route quite faithfully. She thought it wouldn't be surprising if there was another near miss like the one in the Ronin-Gai soon.

"Haa..."

Invited by the peaceful sunlight, a small yawn unintentionally escaped. While being in the middle of a mission, she hurriedly hid it with both hands while looking down.

Last night, she finally secured a bed late at night and laid down her tired body, but she woke up much earlier than scheduled. Perhaps because of this, she was half-asleep and felt heavy and unfocused since this morning.

(Haa... That was a strange dream…)

Noel wiped the tears that had appeared at the corners of her eyes and straightened her back again, muttering a thought she'd had countless times today.

The cause of her strange early awakening was this morning's dream. She'd had a strange dream. Usually, she hardly remembered the contents of her dreams, but today, she remembered it clearly.

It was a dream from when she was little.

Perhaps it was when she was not even ten years old. While coughing on the bed by the window, a boy came into the room and gently stroked her head. She was so happy that the boy came to her, and that he'd stroked my head... She was filled with happiness and fell asleep again.

It was a happy dream. The moment she woke up, she was shocked that it was a dream.

But... it was strange. Noel recalled the dream and tilted her head again and again.

It was a dream as if tracing the memories of her childhood. But Noel had no memories of that time at all. She didn't remember anything about the time before she was rescued from the explosion site five years ago.

Looking back, the room that appeared in that dream was one that Noel didn't know. The green scenery of the fields and forests that could be seen from the window, the bed, and even the pajamas she was wearing.

But why was it such a nostalgic dream?

(Maybe... it's a memory from my past?)

If it was a memory from before she was rescued, then…

(How should I feel?)

The more nostalgic she felt, the more a haze filled her chest. Should she feel happy? Or should she try to forget it? Would thinking about a past she didn't know be an injustice to the people who gave her a happy present?

(I...)

At that moment, she couldn't help but think. Who was she? Where was she born?

"Brother..." Noel muttered to herself while walking along a route that was as far away from the NOL's facilities as possible without taking an extreme detour.

In the dream, she was sick in bed with a cold, and called the boy who stroked her head "brother." Golden hair like sunlight... yes, she was sure he had gentle green eyes.

But there were no other children in the Vermillion family. She didn't know anyone she could call her brother and look up to.

Then who was that boy? Was he... a "brother" she lived with before the five years she doesn't remember?

(It's still a strange dream.)

And she felt strange. She had always vaguely longed for a brother.

"Wait, but..."

As if touching an invisible thread, something brushed Noel's mind. Wasn't there another brother?

"Another... one?" Noel tilted her head at the words whispered by her own unconscious.

Another one... yes, there was another one. He had the same golden hair and green eyes as the boy who appeared in the dream...

"That's it!" Noel's thoughts as she searched for her daydream were suddenly interrupted by the person crossing the street in front of her.

Golden hair, green eyes... and a blue and white uniform, and a blue sword.

"Major... Major Kisaragi!"

Jin Kisaragi, Commander of the Novus Orbis Librarium's 4th Thaumaturgist Squadron.

Noel ran towards the unexpected encounter.

"Wait, Major Kisaragi!" She chased after Jin's retreating figure, not on the main street where many soldiers were walking, but on a quiet street two blocks back.

At Noel's voice, Jin stopped. His back was straight and his posture was impeccable, just like the one she often saw in the corridors of the NOL headquarters. However, his expression when he turned around was clearly different from the cold look he had in the pristine interior of the headquarters.

"You..." Jin turned towards Noel with a heavy step, dragging his heel.

The look in Jin's eyes when he caught sight of Noel was as if he had found something terribly ugly. The green was smeared with disgust, and he looked at her from head to toe as if he didn't want to acknowledge her existence at all.

His sharp gaze glared with such hostility that it seemed as if he wanted to immediately cut Noel's throat.

"Ah, um..."

Noel knew Jin as a cold superior. He rarely answered when she spoke to him. His eyes were always cold, and he sometimes glared at her. But she had never been looked at like this before. It was a look filled with intense hatred that denied her very existence.

"Major Kisaragi... I was ordered to return you from headquarters. Your actions are a serious violation of discipline. Please return to headquarters immediately..."

"Why... why are you here?" Jin interrupted Noel's plea with a low, hoarse voice, suppressing his rage. He took a step towards Noel, his heels clicking loudly.

"I was ordered to bring you back. Please, Major. If you ignore the return order, you may be considered a traitor. If that happens..."

Surely Tsubaki would be more saddened than anyone else.

She tried to continue, but she couldn't put the rest into words.

Jin, who had started walking, ran. Straight towards Noel.

"Eh?"

"Why are you here!?" Jin's white jaw trembled at the shout, and he drew his sword as he stepped forward. The gleaming white blade drew an arc in the air and caught Noel in the stomach.

Noel moved as if pushed back by the murderous intent. She threw off the poncho she was wearing and used it as a shield against Jin's slash. At the same time, she took out two guns from the holster attached to the poncho.

She jumped high and quickly retreated.

When Noel's feet scraped against the ground behind her and she came to a stop, she saw the discarded poncho being cut in two and falling to the ground.

There was no hesitation in the slash. If her reaction had been delayed, it would've been Noel who had fallen to the ground there.

"M-Major K-Kisaragi..." Her lips didn't move well due to shock and fear. Jin swung his sword again at Noel, who couldn't understand what was happening or grasp the situation.

The slash that swept through the air created a blade of ice and launched it at Noel.

In an instant, Noel turned the gun in her hand towards the blade of ice. The ones in her hands were much larger than the self-defense guns usually issued to soldiers, and the barrels were especially thick and long.

They were Noel's personal weapons. A pair of handguns that, for some reason, suddenly appeared in front of Noel shortly after she was taken in by the Vermilion family.

Arcus Diabolus: Bolverk. Noel took it without knowing, but this, like Jin's Mucro Algesco: Yukianesa, was one of the Nox Nyctores created during the Dark War.

Noel quickly fired the gun she was aiming. What Noel's gun fired was not a gunshot, but Ars Magus. The aim was not mistaken, and it shot through and shattered the ice blade that Jin had fired.

"Please stop, Major Kisaragi! If you resist, your crimes will only increase!"

If she let her guard down, it would be dangerous. Noel desperately put strength into her voice while keeping her gun at the ready without letting her guard down.

Perhaps seeing it as hostility, Jin's reaction towards Noel became even more violent.

"I won't give it to you."

"Eh?"

"I won't give it to you..." Jin said in a quiet, heavy, eerily cold voice that crawled from the depths of his stomach. He lowered the unwavering tip of his sword and ran, sliding it along the ground.

If he got too close, it would be dangerous. Noel fired an Ars Magus bullet at Jin's feet as he ran.

Perhaps anticipating this, Jin jumped at the same time. What stretched out to Noel was not the sword, but his leg. Noel used her gun's barrel as a shield to block the deceptively heavy kick that swept through the air.

"Damn!"

From above Noel, who was enduring, Jin swung his sword without even landing. Blocking it with her two guns, Noel quickly retreated and opened the distance. She took a stance, and Jin looked at her. Noel couldn't tell if those eyes were really those of the Jin Kisaragi she knew.

His clouded eyes, as if possessed by something, made her wonder if he was truly seeing her. His hollow gaze seemed to be fixed on something else that wasn't there.

"Don't show that face in front of me, you obstacle!!"

Noel's body bristled at the snarling voice. The spirit itself was like a blade. That blade pierced Noel before the real thing, binding her feet to the spot. She shrank back in fear.

"Your face, your voice, your shadow, never again! Never again!!"

"Kisa..."

Jin, in a state of frenzy, wildly swung his sword. The distance Noel had created was only slight. Distorting his connected face, tossing his light golden hair, Jin stepped in roughly and slashed Noel from below.

...At that very moment.

Something small burst and bounced between Noel and Jin, and from there an enormous amount of black smoke spread with such force that it threatened to engulf the entire area.

"Wh-wha… cough, cough, wha- what is this?"

Noel's vision was lost in an instant. The smoke stung her eyes and throat, making it painful to keep her eyes open or even breathe properly. It seemed to be the same for Jin, as she could hear his choking voice nearby.

"This way, now!"

"Eh? Yes!" Suddenly, someone grabbed her arm and Noel was forcibly pulled out of the smoke, running as she was led.

Even after getting away from the smoke and her throat registering the clean air, Noel's vision didn't clear immediately. Her eyes stung as if sand had been blown into them, and as she ran, Noel had to repeatedly wipe her teary eyes with her arm.

After turning many corners, the person who had been pulling her arm finally stopped. The arm that had been grabbed was immediately released.

"It seems we're not being pursued... for now." Noel recognized the voice that spoke in a light, panting tone. Wiping her still-aching eyes once more, Noel forced them open and looked at her rescuer.

He was right in front of her. It seemed they were in a park with a promenade, and he was sitting on a bench, weakly fanning his face with a black hat. She recognized the black suit and green hair.

"Ha… Hazama-san!"

"Yes? Haa… please, have mercy. Unlike you or Major Kisaragi, I'm not a specialist in combat." Hazama said in a weak, pathetic voice, putting his hat on his head and pulling it down low.

Noel bowed deeply to her unexpected savior.

"Hazama-san, you saved me. Um, thank you very much. I'm sorry for the trouble."

"No, no, I can't very well ignore the plight of my mission partner, can I?" Hazama said, waving his hand loosely and smiling lightly. She had initially found that smile suspicious, but at the moment, it made her feel a little relieved.

Adjusting his hat slightly with his fingertip, Hazama straightened his suit and stood up from the bench.

"Anyway… Major Kisaragi seems to be in quite a troublesome state, doesn't he?" Hazama said in a troubled tone, but a somewhat meaningful smile floated on his face. "I don't know what happened, but he doesn't seem to be in his right mind. If you poke him carelessly, you might cause unnecessary damage."

"Yes." Noel nodded shallowly, still at attention.

Without a doubt, Jin at that time intended to kill Noel. If the battle had continued as it was, Noel would have died and the surrounding area would've suffered tremendous damage.

Hazama lightly tugged on his suit sleeve and opened his mouth, checking the watch on his wrist.

"For now, shall we wait for night?"

"Night?"

"Currently, Ragna the Bloodedge seems to be lurking in the upper levels. He'll probably come to attack the branch tonight. Major Kisaragi will probably come to the branch, aiming for him."

Jin's objective was Ragna the Bloodedge. It was clear from his past criminal record that Ragna the Bloodedge's destination was the branch, so Jin would naturally head there eventually.

Hazama raised his index finger and continued.

"Why don't we just bring in the guards from Kagutsuchi and capture them there? We can't let the scale grow any larger, and with Ragna the Bloodedge involved, I'd like to settle things quickly."

"Yes... that's right. I understand."

At the very least, Noel was all for the idea of contacting Jin at the branch.

Earlier, they were lucky that there were no passersby, but the next time they fought in the city, there was no guarantee that there wouldn't be people around. Even if he was an opponent she should face as a soldier, it was painful and suffocating just to imagine the residents and children she had to protect getting hurt...

Even now, there are many people in this city living peaceful lives, unaware of the NOL's internal troubles.

There might even be a house where a younger sister has caught a cold, and her older brother is taking care of her.

(I'm thinking about that dream again...)

The warm smile of a warm "brother" that she looked up at in a warm bed. She still vaguely remembered the feeling of his hand stroking her hair.

If someone forcibly took that away... she would surely be sad.

"Hello? Lieutenant Vermilion?"

"Y-yes!" Noel jumped up and replied.

Hazama hid his eyes under his hat and smiled wryly.

"What are you going to do until tonight? I have some errands to run, so I'm thinking of looking into Major Kisaragi's situation while taking care of my own business."

She seemed to be daydreaming again. Noel tightened her expression and straightened her back.

"I will continue to search for the Major until tonight. I don't think I can persuade him... but I can't do nothing."

Just clashing with force wasn't the only solution. If they were to meet again, she was thinking of trying to persuade him, saying that Tsubaki was worried.

Noel's words probably wouldn't reach him, but it might be different with Tsubaki. They were from the same high school, and Jin was kind to Tsubaki back then.

"In that case, I'll tell them at the Kagutsuchi branch to contact you if Major Kisaragi appears. You have a communicator, right?" As if demonstrating, Hazama took out a small communicator from his suit pocket and held it up. It was something given to NOL soldiers during missions.
"Ah, yes."

Fortunately, the communicator was in her hand, not on the poncho that was cut by Jin. When she took it out and handed it over, Hazama gave a strangely theatrical nod.

"Please return to the branch if you're contacted. Well, see you later." Hazama slipped the communicator back into his pocket, put his hand on his hat, and bowed. Noel responded with a salute.

With long, shadow-like legs, Hazama headed towards the branch. Noel didn't follow him. Instead, relying on her senses, she decided to return along the path she had just escaped from. She had to retrieve the gun holster that was probably dropped along with the remnants of her poncho.

"I'm sure… it'll be alright."

She would carry out her mission and return to headquarters. As she told herself this, firmly grasping her beloved gun, her lifeline, she shook off the vaguely ominous premonition and ran away from the spot.

Chapter 4: Memorable Church - Siblings

1

December 31, 2199 - 20:57

Night.

The sun was setting, the moon was waxing, the sky was completely repainted, and Kagutsuchi was preparing for a special night that would mark the end of another year in just a few hours.

The moon hanging in the deep-colored night sky was a full moon. Like a hole poked in the sky, the perfectly round light looked down on the ground.

Looking up at that moon, Ragna was very close to the Novus Orbis Librarium's Kagutsuchi branch.

Beneath his white bangs, he narrowed his green and red eyes, glaring at the moon. He glared at the NOL's branch, which floated fantastically in the moonlight.

The branch stood there with a magnificent presence, befitting its role in ruling over the upper city streets. Illuminated by lights from below, it resembled three swords raised towards the heavens, with the central one towering particularly high, its tip pointing towards the moonlit night.

This was the place. That NOL branch, with its clean face looking down on the city with a composed expression. In its deepest part, hidden deep underground, was the "'cauldron" that Ragna should aim for, that he should destroy.

As it had been until now, Ragna didn't devise strategies to infiltrate the branch. He always entered from the front entrance. He went in proudly, as if it was natural, was inevitably stopped, and then began beating down its reckless soldiers.

Unlike when entering the city, only NOL personnel were in the branch at night. He could rampage to his heart's content, without any reservations.

The NOL. A hateful, unbearably hateful name. The one that stole everything from him. This time he would steal everything from them.

Ragna, who had unknowingly clenched his fist, unclenched it and started walking.

The cool night air touched his cheeks. The upper levels were quite far from the ground, so the wind that occasionally blew was strong and unceremonious.

While his hair was sometimes roughly ruffled by the wind, Ragna frowned at the growing sensation as he advanced.

It was sticky, like it was clinging to the inside of his head or chest. He felt like it had been gradually getting worse since last night.

Haven't I done the same thing before?

If this was what they called déjà vu, then the déjà vu that Ragna had felt until now was truly insignificant. It was as if unknown memories were stored somewhere in his brain, and only fragments of them were being shown to him.

Of course, the act of aiming for the branch and destroying the cauldron itself was something that Ragna had repeated many times already. So perhaps it was just his tired mind making a mistake.

But even if he tried to dismiss it like that, there was still a feeling that he couldn't easily wipe away.

"Tch… annoying." Even though he was just walking, he wanted to silence his head, which immediately said, "This happened before," and so on.

He had never come to Kagutsuchi, and walking through the upper levels aiming for the branch was something he always did. What was strange about that?

Standing amidst the hazy feeling, Ragna scratched his hair in a frenzy. He hated things that were unclear like this. It irritated him.

Suddenly, another wind blew. But that wind was different from the ones he had felt so far in the upper levels. It smelled like roses.

"Rabbit?"

Along with the wind that blew from behind him to the front and danced around Ragna's destination, a girl in a black dress appeared. Despite her usual sudden appearance, Ragna was strangely not surprised at all. Somehow, he had a feeling that she would appear soon.

"Good evening." As always, holding her Nago umbrella and accompanied by her red rubber ball, Gii, Rachel gave Ragna a graceful smile that was uncharacteristic of a girl.

"What is it? Got some business with me?" Ragna stopped walking and spoke curtly, putting his hand behind his neck.

Somehow, Rachel's appearance seemed as if it had been planned in advance. If that was the case, then him going to the branch like this, even his coming to Kagutsuchi itself, seemed to be according to plan, and he felt inexplicably dissatisfied.

Perhaps surprised by Ragna's reaction, Rachel blinked her large, doll-like eyes several times.

"Oh, you're quite cold despite the big job ahead of you. You were more aggressive before."

When was "before"? Ragna couldn't immediately grasp it. Was it before Kagutsuchi, when he destroyed the branch? Or was it when they met near Orient Town yesterday afternoon?

Or was it a different "before" altogether?

"It's none of your business. I've got my own problems." Ragna wondered if Rachel had seen through everything about this strange, inexplicable feeling he had been harboring. He ignored his own thoughts and spat the words towards the ground.

The black umbrella left Rachel's hand and wriggled, and Nago transformed into its original form, a large cat, and grinned.

"Being all delicate. It doesn't suit you at all." As Nago laughed, Gii, hiding behind Rachel, also chuckled mockingly.

"He's probably just hungry again. He hasn't eaten anything decent since then, has he~?"

Normally, he would get irritated by the familiars' lighthearted remarks and either yell at them or hit them. But right now, the sticky feeling of déjà vu was more concerning, and he wasn't really in the mood.

"Tch. Still as annoying as ever." Even his curses didn't have much bite.

Nago laid down on the ground in a cat-like posture, looking at Ragna with his huge eyes.

"Oh my, you're really not energetic. No fun at all~"

"It's not like that. It's just… what do you call it?" He couldn't find the right words to connect and convey what he was feeling.

Rachel often belittled him, calling him dull, but Ragna, as if scolding himself for his truly dull thought process, ruffled his hair messily.

"Ah, damn it, never mind me! More importantly, what do you want? If you don't have any business, go home already!" He didn't want to be any more irritated than this when he was about to infiltrate enemy territory.

But there was no way that Rachel would listen to such a request from Ragna. While twirling her long hair with her fingertips, her intelligent and arrogant crimson eyes made a look of exasperation.

"I thought you were unusually calm, but it seems you're just distracted. If you're like that, you'll get stabbed again by that child you're about to meet."

"That child I'm about to meet?"

Rachel once again spoke in a meaningful way. Disliking that, Ragna frowned and asked, but immediately sensed something.

"Could it be… Jin?"

He had heard that Jin fought in the Ikaruga Civil War as a soldier of the NOL and became a hero. The Hero of Ikaruga, and the wielder of the Nox Nyctores, Mucro Algesco: Yukianesa.

As if amused that Ragna had guessed correctly, Rachel, with a hint of something lingering in her large eyes, neither nodded nor shook her head, but opened her mouth.

"What I want is… I have something I want to ask you."

"...Why are you being so formal?"

"Ragna." As if silencing the howling wind, Rachel's wind scattered the scent of roses, swallowing the surrounding wind sounds. Rachel's flowing golden hair danced like ribbons, eventually falling onto her shoulders. "Why do you aim for the cauldron?"

The question had a strange resonance. Ragna grimaced suspiciously. He had just been asked a similar question yesterday.

While directing a searching gaze towards Rachel's eyes, which were much lower than his own, Ragna repeated the same answer.

"Because I don't like it. That's why I'll destroy it... What else do you want me to answer?"

Rachel's way of asking questions seemed like a mean-spirited trick, as if she wouldn't stop asking until she got a specific answer.

Rachel put her index finger to her red lips, like rose petals, and let out a chuckle.

"That's a secret." She didn't deny that she had such an intention.

Ragna was surprised, which was rare. Usually, at this point, he'd receive a barrage of insults that would make him think he shouldn't have pried any further, and in the end, it would be glossed over without him really understanding.

Rachel waved her white fingers in the air, as if brushing something away.

"My business is finished. You can go, Ragna."

Saying that, she beckoned to Nago, turning the cat back into an umbrella and holding it. In the shadow of the umbrella that blocked the dazzling moonlight, Rachel seemed to show a fleetingly lonely expression... or so it seemed. At least, that's how it appeared to Ragna's eyes, if only for an instant.

"Rachel." Thinking such a thing, her name involuntarily spilled from his mouth.

"What is it?" Raising the angle of the umbrella just a little, Rachel responded with her usual leisurely smile.

Ragna hesitated for a few seconds, wondering what to ask. But he quickly gave up on finding the right words and asked as he thought.

"That question you just asked, have you asked me before?"

"Are you stupid? I asked you yesterday afternoon."

"I know that. I'm not talking about then... what I'm trying to say is, before that."

"Are you talking about when you were little?"

"No."

That's not it. What he wanted to say was too abstract.

Rachel, with a capricious air, waited for him on the spot while Ragna restlessly scratched his head, busily moving his hands up and down, and struggled with his lips.

"I can't put it into words well, but... I feel like something similar happened before. When I was on my way to the Kagutsuchi branch, you asked me that question... Did something like that happen?"

Ragna was aware that he was asking something strange. He was certain that this was the first time he had come to Kagutsuchi, and therefore, even stepping into the upper levels of

Kagutsuchi was a first for him last night. Even so, he was asking if she had asked him the same question here before.

He wondered if she would tease him, saying he had a dream or something. Or perhaps he would get her usual insults.

But to Ragna, who was prepared to be thoroughly told off, Rachel showed an expression as if her eyes had widened in surprise. Then, with a gentle smile, as if releasing the strength from her shoulders, she softly smiled.

"Well, I wonder. If you think it happened, then it happened... and if you don't think it happened, then it didn't happen, right?"

Although her attitude was softer than usual, the words that came back were like a riddle, typical of Rachel.

"Huh? What do you mean? Did it happen? Or didn't it?" He had asked the question himself without really understanding it, and with Rachel's answer, he understood even less. As the heat between Ragna's eyebrows deepened, Rachel chuckled as if amused by it.

"That's something you can decide, Ragna."

"I don't understand..."

At the very least, he wanted her to say yes or no. Since Rachel had never shown such kindness before, perhaps it was wrong to expect it.

Ragna let out an impatient sigh and bared his fangs. Looking at that, Rachel lightly kicked the ground. Carrying an overwhelmingly dense scent of roses, Rachel's body floated into the air.

Rachel, standing in a composed pose with her umbrella held high above Ragna, moved her gaze as if urging him to the bridge-like passage leading to the branch.

"Come on, go now. If you dawdle around here like this, you'll accidentally miss the change of day."

In this situation, even if he persisted, Rachel probably wouldn't answer his question. Sensing this from his past experiences, Ragna let out a sigh of resignation, dropped his shoulders, and started walking listlessly.

"I know that without you telling me. See ya."

"Yes, goodbye, Ragna. And... don't forget."

"Forget what? ...Ah, no." Ragna, who had already started walking, looked up at Rachel over his shoulder, stuck his finger in his ear as if annoyed, and said,"That thing, right? 'Never think that the Azure Grimoire is your own power'..."

At Ragna's words, Rachel smiled. Like a red rose blooming from a bud.

Realizing there would be no further reply, Ragna crossed the bridge, adjusting the sword hanging at his waist so that it would be easy to draw.

If he went through the bridge-shaped passage, the front entrance of the NOL's Kagutsuchi branch would be ahead. During the day, many soldiers and residents with business at the branch come and go.

But at this hour, there was no one there. Or rather, there were too few people.

It was strange that not a single soldier could be seen. There was no sign of the barrier Ars that should have been stretched out across the road for crime prevention. It was different from the branch he knew. Ragna quickened his pace, feeling a tingling unease and abnormality.

Rachel, high above in the sky, watched him with the moon behind her.

What lit up in her chest was not despair this time. Nor was it resignation. It was... a small…

"...To think you'd make me have even a sliver of expectation. You've come up with an interesting scheme, Ragna."

Narrowing her crimson eyes, raising her red rose lips in a good mood, Rachel saw off the red jacket figure hurrying along the passage far below.

"God watches dreams repeat endlessly... the same dream hundreds, thousands of times," Rachel said, as if singing.

Yes, she had repeated it over and over again. She had spent countless nights. The end of the year with the full moon in Kagutsuchi.

Now, the final chapter was about to begin.

This time, the curtain might fall with a slightly different production than usual. Even if it had the same ending, if there was even one thing that caught her eye, she couldn't miss it.

Rachel deployed teleportation magic in the sky, scattered the fragrance of roses, and disappeared from the spot.

December 31, 2199 - 21:00

The Novus Orbis Librarium's Kagutsuchi branch is entered by crossing a bridge-shaped passage illuminated by pale lights, and passing through the front entrance located beyond.

In front of the front entrance, a barrier Ars was set up to keep out outsiders, and its power was such that it would turn anyone unrelated to ashes in an instant. Therefore, in order to enter, even a soldier had to state their identity in front of it.

But for some reason, there were no guards on watch at the branch tonight, and the barrier Ars had also disappeared. Even if one entered, there wasn't a single soldier to be found.

There was no damage to the front entrance door, and there was no sign that someone had forced it open and broken through. It wasn't attacked by anyone.

What showed this more than the disappeared barrier and the undamaged door was the inside of the branch. There were no scratches on the floor or walls. The furniture was in its usual position, and not a single tear was on the carpet or curtains. Even so, the inside of the branch was completely deserted.

No one was there. There wasn't even a faint murmur or a slight trace of human presence. Not even a single corpse.

If this abnormal situation was caused by an attack, how meticulous and obsessively persistent would the attacker be? It would be comically thorough to eliminate people from the branch and then disappear themselves.

But so what? Such a thing was trivial.

For Jin Kisaragi, who had infiltrated the branch with the intent to kill anyone who got in his way, the unexplained disappearance of the soldiers was of no concern. It was rather fortunate that troublesome things were taken care of without him knowing.

Now he could wait without worrying about anything.

He could fight without being disturbed by anything.

He could kill.

That man.

Going further into the entrance, the view opened up dazzlingly, and he came to a place called the sanctuary, a high ceilinged atrium. Circular passages stacked several floors high uniformly surrounded and faced a huge and solemn statue of a goddess.

The white, immaculate figure was radiant and beautiful, attracting the worship of many soldiers.

The entire area, including the sanctuary, never sank into darkness like the city at night. This was because countless magic circles deployed above the goddess statue constantly cast light in a white, divine color on the goddess statue and on each floor of the branch overlooked by the goddess.

The soft, veil-like light alone made the place look extremely divine... it must have dazzled many eyes.

Jin looked down at the space provided straight ahead from the entrance, where such light poured down from directly in front, from the top of a staircase one step up.

The top of the stairs was in the shadow of a thick pillar, and the light-filled space viewed from there looked even more brilliant.

He was waiting for someone to appear in that light.

Red jacket, white hair, wielding a sword and carrying a grimoire around his neck, his eyes red on the right and green on the left. The one Jin waited an eternity for, who he could imagine in much finer detail than the NOL's ridiculous information network.

Ragna the Bloodedge.

It would be soon. A little later than him, he would appear here... yes, he should appear in that stage of light.

He was so impatient, so impatient for that moment.

Ah, look. Conveniently, there was no one in the branch, so there was no unnecessary noise. That's why he could hear it well.

The sound of a man's footsteps echoing from the entrance down the corridor, making the deserted branch feel eerie, walking towards here with large strides.

How many more steps? Shall we count? Look, a little more, just a little more. He's getting closer. Six more steps and his toes will be visible. Four more steps and his whole body will be visible.

Two steps. One step.

There, he found him.

The eye-catching red jacket and pure white hair.

"Brother..." The moment he caught sight of that figure, a large tremor shook the depths of his body. Only the impulse from within his stomach seemed to leap out and slash. But no, that's not right. Because the one who would kill him...

"It's me!" He swayed forward, his heel clicking on the cold floor. The hard sound echoed, and Ragna turned around at that sound.

At the same time, Jin kicked the floor and leapt down from the top of the stairs, drawing Yukianesa in his hand—

The memories of the dazzling sunlight are like a deeply thrust knife.

Jin doesn't remember much about his childhood.

He only remembered fragments of it, like an album with only parts of scenes cut out and arranged. Happy memories, kind memories... sad memories, scary memories. Painful memories, agonizing memories, bitter memories. None of which he really wanted to see, so he kept them securely in a box deep within his brain and locked it.

Even so, the memories insist from inside the box. They whisper not to his consciousness but to his unconsciousness, distorting his emotions as if running extra horizontal threads.

Because they are lonely memories. Every single one of them, they were always lonely memories.

The high-pitched sound of a *kaan* was the sound of the wooden branches they clashed with, repelled by the force.

The branch he gripped in his hand was of a moderate length and moderate weight. It was something he found and picked up in the forest, and while it was in the hands of the still young boys, it was not just a branch but a famous sword.

On a fine noon, the sun warmly watched over the fruitful forest and the meadow that spread next to it, and the 'Church of the Ark' that stood there.

The space between the church and the forest was the perfect match field for the two boys living in the church. Once they finished their daily task of picking up firewood, they would take the special sword they found along the way and have a mock sword fight.

They had never learned swordsmanship, so they imagined the many brave warriors and heroes that appeared in the many stories they heard from the sister, and acted like them.

Sometimes they were a hero who defeated a giant dragon with a magic sword, sometimes they were a knight who galloped through the battlefield fighting against a large army, sometimes they were a warrior who saved a country with his bravery, sometimes they were six heroes who fought through a giant monster to save the world.

But always, it was the older brother who ultimately won.

"Ugh!"

The vibration of the strongly repelled branch... or rather, his beloved sword, traveled through his arm, and Jin, who was still only ten years old or so at this time, staggered backward as if tripping. Before he could take even a few steps back, his feet got tangled, and he fell over.

The ground was a soft carpet of grass, so it didn't hurt much. Even so, while he rubbed his bottom that had hit the ground and pretended to be in pain, his brother hurriedly threw away his sword and rushed over, calling out "Brother."

Even though it was Jin who got carried away and forgot to control his strength, his brother would give a wry smile, saying "What are you falling down for?" and then reach out his hand to Jin, who was still flipped over.

"My foot got stuck." Happy at the hand and gaze directed straight at him, Jin tried to grab his brother's hand with a shy smile.

But at that moment...

"Cough... "

A little distance away, a girl who had been sitting near the church, watching the match between his brother and Jin, suddenly hunched over and started coughing.

"Cough, cough... haa, haa..." Shaking her chest and shrinking her small body, the girl hunched over as if holding down her chest.

His brother, who had turned back at the sound of the first cough, hurriedly ran towards the girl, noticing her abnormality.

"Saya! Are you okay?!"

His brother rushed to the girl, supporting her slender shoulders and rubbing her thin back. Not with the roughness he had when he repelled the wooden sword, but with a gentle touch, as if handling something very precious.

"Cough... it hurts... brother... cough cough..."

"It's okay, breathe slowly. Here... breathe in... breathe out. That's right. I'll carry you to bed right away." Saying that, his brother easily picked up the girl's small body and went back into the church. Soon, the hurried voice of the sister could be heard from inside.

"Oh my, that's terrible. I was careless because her fever had gone down. Let her sleep in her room, Ragna. I'll get a towel and water right away."

"Yeah, I understand... Here, don't cry, Saya. It'll be okay. Me and the sister are here." The sound of the sister's footsteps rushing around busily. The sound of his brother's footsteps walking carefully to the children's room, being careful not to drop her.

Jin had been watching that scene all along. Jin had been listening to that sound all along. On the soft grassland, he had been sitting flipped over, listening all along.

After staying like that silently for a while, and eventually getting up without anyone's help, Jin returned to the church alone.

When he entered from the back door, the kitchen was right there. In the kitchen, the sister was making something warm. While he was peeking secretly from the shadows, the sister noticed Jin, perhaps hearing some sound, turned around and smiled at him, saying:

"Welcome back, Jin. Lunch will be ready soon, so can you call Ragna? I think he's with Saya."

"...Yeah." He didn't really want to go. But since the sister asked him, he couldn't refuse, so Jin nodded meekly and headed to the children's room.

The children's room was close by. So Jin quickly reached his destination, and secretly peeked inside through the gap in the half-open door.

Warm light from outside was shining through the window with white curtains, and the room was bright. On the bed by the window, his sister was lying down with a blanket and comforter up to her shoulders. Beside her, his brother was sitting on a chair, watching over her.

"Don't worry, you'll get better soon. I'm here, so rest assured and get some sleep, okay?"

"Yeah... brother."

A gentle voice and a spoiled voice.

His brother was stroking his sister's head. His sister narrowed her eyes happily at that hand, and smiled blissfully.

Jin looked at his own hand beyond the door. The hand that was reached out and was supposed to be held back and helped up… was cold.

It was cold.

The high-pitched *"clang"* was the sound of clashing swords, repelled by the weak force.

In Jin's hand was the ice sword, Yukianesa. Facing him was the man with the red jacket and white hair, Ragna, holding his beloved sword with its wide, thick blade. Orange sparks scattered between them as they clashed, mixing with the light pouring down from the high ceiling and disappearing.

Jin's slashing attacks, unleashed in quick succession, were one, two, three. Diagonally, diagonally, horizontally. Ragna's sword blocked and parried each of them, repelling them with a seemingly waning strength.

How long had they been repeating this exchange? From the very first blow, Jin, wielding his sword, shouted gleefully as he pressed towards Ragna, evaded the counterattacks, retreated again, and then rushed in again.

"Hahaha! What's wrong, brother? Come at me more seriously. Otherwise... it won't be fun!"

Ragna used his sword as a shield to withstand Jin's continuous slashes, which intended to cut him to pieces. Matching the last strike, he parried the sword and repelled it strongly, then retreated to create distance. He couldn't keep taking those attacks endlessly.

"Jin... you'd better stop messing around!" Ragna roared, his body trembling with anger. Closing the distance with a growl and a light leap, Ragna swung his sword high and brought it down towards Jin with all his might.

Even the sound of it cutting through the air was violent. If he took it head-on, his arm would be numbed.

Jin evaded the heavy slash with minimal movement. But he was too close. The wind pressure shook his golden hair along with his head, causing a slight dizziness. Despite this, he kicked high towards Ragna's head.

Ragna's head was also shaken greatly by the tip of the colliding boot, and Ragna and Jin both staggered back a few steps, holding their heads.

"Tch... kuku... it hurts. I'm dizzy even though it didn't hit... You really are amazing, brother." While shaking his head to clear his blurred vision, Jin moved his shoulder as if shaking it off, letting out a twisted laugh. Ragna, also shaking his head to regain his senses, glared at him.

"Don't laugh, you bastard." The voice he spat out was hot, as if it was about to burn from inside his stomach. He thought that if it did burn, he would just burn him to death as he was. While tightly gripping his sword, he left it to his instincts.

The root of Ragna's loss was his younger brother in front of him, wearing blue and white clothes and laughing. The madness that befell this man had distorted everything.

But Ragna's anger didn't reach him at all, and Jin laughed as innocently as ever.

The root of Jin's establishment was his older brother in front of him, wearing red and black clothes and raging. Only this man's existence gave everything to Jin.

"Ah, it's fun, brother... let's play more... let's kill each other more! Here, no one can disturb us... no one is here! Brother is my only brother! Only mine...!" Jin's scream, tearing his throat, had a terrible sound of madness. "Haha... that's right, my only brother... That's why I'll kill you, kill you, kill you... I'm the only one who can kill you, brother!!"

The disturbingly chaotic voice, no matter how many times it was repeated, only sounded to Ragna's ears like the sad ramblings of his crazed younger brother. He only became more and more angry, thinking that this madness had destroyed everything.

"Quit acting like a childish brat! Stop spouting nonsense and just drop dead already!"

Jin jumped in, kicked with his knee, and then desperately swung his sword at Ragna. Glaring down at Jin from a slightly higher position, Ragna angrily swung his sword.

"Tch!" The shock that ran through his body made Jin's arm numb. At that moment, Jin's face twisted into an insane grimace... yet, for some reason, it also seemed to hold a hint of a joyful smile.

In an instant, the scenery of the past flashed through Ragna's mind. He thought he heard his brother's voice, calling him sweetly.

"This..."

Hateful. Hateful. Hatred ran through Ragna's body. He hadn't forgotten the pain and despair when he was stabbed by his brother's sword, lying next to the burning church.

It was foul play to make such a brotherly face.

"You idiot!!"

Instead of swinging the sword he'd pulled back with all his might, Ragna dropped it. In its place, Ragna slammed his fist into Jin's stomach. A large amount of air escaped from Jin's throat with a dull impact. The force probably reached his bones. Ragna felt something hard break along with the flesh in his fist. He then struck Jin's face with the same arm, sending him flying.

"Gah!" Jin let out a crushed scream, his body flying away. He was violently slammed against the mirror-like polished corridor of the NOL's branch, bouncing twice before collapsing onto the floor. The impact caused Yukianesa to leave Jin's hand and roll to Ragna's feet.

"Gu... hah... geh..." The fallen Jin coughed distortedly. He was trying to get up, supporting himself with his arms. Beyond his disheveled golden hair, his green eyes were wide open with manic glee, staring at Ragna.

"S-still... not... not going to kill... me... I... have to... kill... you, brother..." He said breathlessly, putting his hand on the wall and dragging himself up. Leaning his back against the wall, Jin somehow managed to stand, and he wore a smile on his face, which was cut and covered in blood.

"Brother... I've always wanted to see you... I've been searching all this time."

If these words weren't heard in this place... with this expression, with this tone of voice, Ragna might have felt different emotions. But even at this point, the deranged aura from Jin's face didn't disappear, and his voice trembled with a small, cackling laugh.

"All this time... I've wanted... to kill you. Again, again and again, I'll kill you, kill you... Only I can liberate you, brother..." Jin spoke somewhat ecstatically and somewhat in agony.

Even though he hadn't received any slashes, there was no doubt that he couldn't even breathe properly. The breath he inhaled trying to laugh didn't circulate well, and Jin coughed violently, spitting blood from his mouth.

Even so, Jin took a step forward, trying to approach him. As if to stop him, Ragna quickly walked towards Jin.

"Liberate me from what?" Ragna's voice was sharp with irritation. He felt like they'd had this kind of exchange before. In the same place, in the same way. What was this feeling? What was this emotion that remained somewhere in his head?

It was irritating. Perhaps he didn't understand anything. Perhaps he was just venting his anger on what was in front of him without understanding anything.

Following his instincts, Ragna grabbed Jin's swaying collar. Roughly pulling him closer, he forcefully slammed his forehead against his brother's forehead.

"Don't get cocky, you damn brat!"

"Ugh..." The sound of bones colliding shook Jin's consciousness greatly and made him dizzy.

Jin's green eyes, which had been fixed on Ragna until then, even while contorting in pain, became dark and clouded. His body lost its strength as if collapsing, and he fell to the ground when Ragna released him.

Ragna stared down at Jin, who was like a puppet with its strings cut, for a while. He could kill him now. He could stop his breath. Just like Jin had done to him once in the church, he could just stab him once in the back. He could even cut off his head.

Even if his head and body were connected, this brother would not experience the same hatred and sense of loss that Ragna had experienced. He wouldn't yearn for those days and lament that he wanted to protect them. He might not even regain his sanity and feel the slightest regret.

But... for some reason he hesitated.

(...Hey, sister.)

Ragna kicked the Yukianesa that was rolling around, sending it far away. The forceful gesture was clearly an act of anger.

(What should I do? What would you do...)

Remembering the sister who always strictly told him to always get along with his brothers, he picked up his own sword this time.

(What would you do...)

Ragna looked at Jin once more.

If he killed Jin here, the sister would be angry. That person had a strange fixation on what a brother should be.

"...How ridiculous." It was ridiculous to think about it. "If you want to play, come again."

If he wasn't in such a hurry, he might have been able to give him a proper fight. With that thought in mind, Ragna returned his sword to his waist and left Jin there, heading for the stairs further back. Deep into the underground of the branch, to head to the cauldron.

Jin heard the sound of Ragna's footsteps moving away, his consciousness already fading and disappearing.

(No... Brother, don't go.)

Something instinctive whispered to him that he had to stop him. He must not go. Otherwise, everything would be the same as before.

(Before? Before what... when...?)

His thoughts sank. He couldn't understand anything anymore.

In the darkness of his falling consciousness, Jin muttered.

(Your hands are cold... brother.)

Just like that, Jin lost all his strength on the cold floor.

3

Noel ran through the corridors of the Kagutsuchi branch, her head filled with bewilderment and confusion.

Something was wrong. This was absolutely wrong.

The barrier Ars had disappeared without a trace, and there wasn't a single soldier on watch, even though someone should have been on duty all night. On top of that, the door at the front entrance was roughly split in two, as if it had been slashed.

Someone had broken in. It was probably either Jin or Ragna the Bloodedge.

What in the world happened to the barrier and the missing soldiers? Could it be the work of the Azure Grimoire, which she'd heard Ragna the Bloodedge possessed?

Thinking about it like that, Ragna the Bloodedge seemed more and more like an uncontrollable monster, and it scared her.

But what was truly the scariest of all... was the silence ringing painfully in her ears.

The sound of her running shoes echoed surprisingly. An empty branch. Was this place always so vast and desolate?

She had the illusion that even the sound of her pounding heartbeat was leaking out.

Running through the corridor, which felt many times longer than it actually was, her vision suddenly opened up.

What jumped into her sight was the sanctuary, a brightly-lit, high-ceilinged cathedral with a deep, open space. The white goddess statue was illuminated by the light from a magic circle that shone brighter than sunlight, greeting Noel with a breathtakingly beautiful sight that made her gasp.

As expected, there wasn't a single soldier to be seen here either.

"Is... anyone there!?"

Even one person would do. She wanted to meet someone, anyone wearing the same uniform. Because how on earth could something like this happen? The more she felt the absence of people, the more her confusion grew.

She would have been much calmer if there had been even a trace of blood.

The branch was empty, as if no one had been there from the start. There was no sign of a struggle, nor any indication that someone had been forcibly taken away.

An indescribable unease felt as if it was scraping away at Noel from the inside.

As Noel staggered towards the goddess statue, as if drawn to it, she suddenly felt a raw smell stimulating her nostrils.

It was the smell of blood. To be more precise, it was a foul and violent smell, like blood mixed with sweat, saliva, and vomit.

Someone was there. Noel looked around desperately, and... there he was. Near the stairs leading further inside. At the border between the faint shadow cast by the thick pillar and the light-filled space where Noel stood, there was a man lying face down on the cold floor.

He was wearing a blue and white uniform. A soldier of the NOL.

Noel rushed over in a hurry.

"Are you okay!? Please get a hold of yourself!" When she got to his side, she finally realized who it was.

A slender body with smooth, golden hair. His lightly tilted face was fair-skinned, with familiar features.

"M-Major Kisaragi!?"

It was an unbelievable sight.

Jin Kisaragi, who had shown unparalleled success in the Ikaruga Civil War and risen to the rank of Major in just a few years after graduating from the military academy... the man who was even hailed as the "Hero of Ikaruga," was collapsed powerlessly on the floor like a discarded doll.

There was almost nothing frozen in the surrounding area. If Jin had rampaged, the area would have been cold and frozen. The absence of that meant that there was someone who had restrained and defeated Jin without allowing him to use his full power.

An average soldier wouldn't be a match for him even if they came in numbers. Even the above average soldiers wouldn't be a match. If that was the case...

"Could it be, Ragna the Bloodedge..." Noel muttered the name of the "Grim Reaper" as if whispering. He was here. And... strangely, she was drawn to him.

(Huh...?)

Noel was puzzled by what the name she had spoken aloud had evoked in her heart.

Ragna the Bloodedge. When she first heard the name "Grim Reaper," he sounded much more terrifying. An unreasonable destroyer who went around destroying Librarium branches one after another. She had thought that if she saw him, he would be a vicious and terrifying man who would make her legs tremble if she faced him.

But, when was it? She no longer felt the same fear towards this name as before. Even though she hadn't met him in person, and there hadn't been any events that changed her impression.

Yes, now she even thought that he might be a surprisingly normal person, a surprisingly kind person...

(That can't be right...)

He was the most wanted criminal in history, a villain that the entire Librarium was chasing.

Had she become accustomed to the situation that he might be nearby while she was in Kagutsuchi?

She had often been warned since her student days that she was short-sighted and simplistic, but she didn't think she was that bad. But... it was true that she felt something warm about the name Ragna.

(...No. If I think about unnecessary things... I won't understand.)

The act of thinking would only confuse her, and she wouldn't be able to think anything.

"Right, I have to contact them and get Major Kisaragi treated..."

"Oh my, you've been thoroughly beaten up, haven't you?"

"Eek!"

Suddenly, a shadow fell over her from behind, and she was called out to, making Noel jump and turn around. In that instant, she flipped over and landed on her butt right next to the fallen Jin. Looking up with a face pale from surprise, she saw the familiar black suit standing there.

"Come on, come on, there's no need to scream like that. It hurts my feelings!"

It was Hazama. He looked down at Noel, who had embarrassingly lost her composure, with an exasperated expression, and shook his head as usual, as if saying "Oh dear."

Even though she was looking up at him from quite a low position, it was strange that she couldn't see his eyes behind his hat.

"I-I'm sorry, I was just surprised..."

"Well, it can't be helped. The branch is in this state... it's like a haunted house."

Hazama twisted his mouth, which was shaped like the kanji "へ," into a wry smile, and looked around. The wide and bright sanctuary was devoid of any human presence, so much so that Jin's fallen figure stood out from the scenery.

While supporting the holster hanging at her waist, Noel stood up and asked timidly.

"Um, Hazama-san... where is everyone else from the branch?"

"Well. I don't know. I've been looking around the branch, but I couldn't find a single person. Well, I'm glad I was able to contact you safely."

Noel didn't know what kind of face to make at Hazama, who said such things lightly and nonchalantly, so she looked down and simply replied, "I see."

She shuddered at the thought that everywhere, even the executive offices and sleeping quarters that couldn't be seen from here, was deserted.

"For now, let's contact the crew of the Ars Magus ship and have Major Kisaragi transported. We can't do anything about investigating this branch by ourselves."

"Y-yes... but..." Noel looked up at Hazama, who was starting to manipulate his communicator, and then let her gaze wander around the area. Seeing that, Hazama turned his gaze towards Noel while putting the communicator to his ear.

"Is there anything you're concerned about, Lieutenant Vermilion?"

"...Um, I think it was Ragna the Bloodedge who did this to Major Kisaragi..."

If she kept silent, she would surely feel uncomfortable later, as if something was stuck in her chest. So Noel resolutely raised her face and appealed to Hazama.

Hazama tilted his head somewhat quizzically, as if what he'd been told was unexpected.

"Oh, probably. There's no one else."

"Then, we have to chase after him too. This situation may be the fault of the 'Grim Reaper,' and we might still be able to catch him now!" Noel's voice had an unusual strength in it.

It wasn't that she was so passionate about arresting the "Grim Reaper," nor that she wanted to avenge Jin Kisaragi. It was just that she felt inexplicably impatient.

But Hazama looked unenthusiastic, and scratched his cheek with his slender index finger, then smiled vaguely.

"You know… I think I told you this before, but I'm not really a combat specialist. My mission is solely to secure Major Kisaragi, and the 'Grim Reaper' is a separate matter, so to speak..."

"That's fine. I'll pursue Rag... the 'Grim Reaper' by myself. Captain Hazama, please take care of Major Kisaragi."

"By yourself? That's a bit too reckless, isn't it?"

"I'll be fine... probably." She wasn't confident, but she felt terribly guilty about turning a blind eye and leaving Ragna the Bloodedge alone here.

And more than anything else, if she chased after him here... she might be able to meet Ragna the Bloodedge. She wasn't clearly aware of that feeling, but there was certainly that thought in Noel's heart.

Hazama put his hand on his hat and shrugged.

"Well, I suppose I have no choice. I'll take care of Major Kisaragi. And as for Ragna the Bloodedge, he's probably heading underground."

"Underground? You mean the underground research facility?"

She had heard that there were various research facilities deep underground in the NOL's branches. Soldiers rarely set foot there, but Noel had witnessed people who looked like researchers boarding the elevator to the underground.

"Yes. The destruction of that underground lab is Ragna the Bloodedge's real purpose. To get to the underground, you can go up these stairs and use the very back of the hall at the end." Hazama said, pointing his sharp chin to the back of the stairs with magnificent decorations.

The elevator to the underground. Noel had never used it before.

"Thank you very much. Then, excuse me!"

Was it really okay to go by herself? Noel swallowed the anxiety that was gradually swelling in her heart, then gave a stiff salute and turned on her heel. She ran up the stairs leading to the back with light steps.

She aimed for the elevator in the back. She had to move quickly, quickly. For some reason, such impatience hastened Noel's steps.

She didn't notice that Hazama was shaking his shoulders and laughing behind her back as she left.

Chapter 5: Calamity Trigger—Successor to the Azure

1

Soundlessly and quietly, the elevator slid down, carrying Ragna deep into the underground of Kagutsuchi.

The cylindrical box opened its mouth, revealing a scene to Ragna that was completely different from the interior of the branch he had passed through so far.

In stark contrast to the clean and magnificently decorated atmosphere of the NOL's branch, the hall and the corridor leading beyond it, located deep underground, were dark, inorganic, and chilly.

Even the end of the ceiling, which was so high that it made him look up, was covered with metallic scaffolding, and the walls were equipped with countless surveillance cameras and various other monitors.

Despite being unmanned, the machines and Ars Magus seemed to be faithfully doing their jobs, and the quiet air conditioning and dim lighting welcomed Ragna to the underground world.

The branches of the NOL all had the same structure wherever you went. It wasn't a very new sight for Ragna, who had already infiltrated the underground of the branch many times.

His destination was beyond this corridor. Ragna started walking towards the corridor, which was lit by a lamp that illuminated only his feet.

But he stopped as soon as he stepped into the dimly lit corridor.

Someone was there.

Was it a premonition from the strange déjà vu that had been bothering Ragna earlier, or was it due to the primal instincts awakening in his brain? He didn't know. But beyond the corridor that continued in a graceful curve, from the shadow that couldn't be clearly seen, a gust of murderous intent blew towards Ragna.

"What?!"

In reality, it wasn't wind. But its force and pressure were extraordinary, and Ragna instinctively put both arms in front of him to protect himself.

The illusion that his breath had been taken away by the wind pressure pulled Ragna's feet back from the corridor.

What was this? What on earth was this? Suddenly, his heart was beating wildly in his chest.

Someone was beyond this corridor. And that someone, still clad in an abnormal amount of murderous intent, was walking towards him step by step.

"Who- who the hell are you?"

He was going to be killed.

Feeling an instinctive fear, Ragna involuntarily raised his voice. It was like a wild dog's threat. He hadn't even seen this man yet, and his voice already lacked any composure.

No, it wasn't something, it wasn't someone. He knew this presence, this murderous intent... He felt like he'd seen it before.

He *should have* seen it before.

Ragna wasn't sure if it was the same or not. But he could recall "that guy" who appeared before him as if he were a symbol of fear, spewing out a killing intent that could kill a person on its own.

Footsteps were approaching. What he saw first was the foot that stepped out.

White feet with dull, grayish-silver claw-like parts attached to them. Those inhuman feet would take away one's breath and their power to stand if they were slammed into the stomach.

Next, the knees, the arms, the shoulders, the torso. As if floating in the unreliable light of the corridor, they came into Ragna's view.

(That's right. That white shadow... it's him.)

Completely swallowed by the approaching presence of that figure, forgetting how to even breathe normally, Ragna felt strangely convinced.

The one who appeared was a white oni.

His body was tall and toned, like a man's. He wore a white outfit that covered his entire body, and on that outfit, there were many red, eyeball-like things attached to it.

There were no eyes on his face. Not just eyes. There was no nose, no mouth, nothing. Only a smooth surface in the place where it should have carried an expression. From his head,

something like silver hair hung down in a long strand, swaying left and right in accordance with his heavy steps. On his back was a huge sword. An odachi that was probably as tall as he was.

The moment he saw it, Ragna remembered the pain of a slash he hadn't even received. His expression contorted violently and he pressed his shoulder, feeling as if his body was being gouged and torn apart.

(It's okay. I haven't taken a single hit yet.)

But it felt like it wouldn't be long before that happened.

"Damn... you..."

There was no way he could remain silent. Ragna dragged his feet and retreated inch by inch, glaring strongly at the man who had stopped at the entrance of the hall where the elevator was.

His legs were shaking. He didn't know why, but fear ran up from his feet and dulled Ragna's body.

The man with the white face stared at Ragna calmly. Since he had no eyes, it might be strange to say that he was staring, but even though their eyes didn't meet, the man stared at Ragna, and restrained Ragna's movements with his gaze and presence.

"It's been a while, Dark One." A low voice spoke from under the surface.

At that moment, a shiver ran through Ragna's entire body. He gritted his chattering teeth, desperately resisting the fear that was about to drag him in from his feet.

"It's been a while? I don't remember meeting you. Where the hell did we meet?" He put strength in his stomach and glared at the white mask. He chose a strong and aggressive tone purely as a bluff. It took all his might to keep his legs from giving way. "Sorry, but could you let me through? I've got business in the back. I don't have time to deal with you."

If you try to interfere, I won't show mercy. As if to show that intention, Ragna put his hand on the sword hanging at his waist.

"I cannot allow you to pass."

Solemnly declaring this, the white-faced man put his hand on the sword on his back. Grasping the hilt that protruded from around his shoulder, he pulled it out with a cool, sharp sound. The excessively long blade was illuminated by the dim light, making it appear even sharper, even colder, and enhancing its brilliance.

Holding the sword vertically, the white-faced man said, "You are destined to die here. You will not go any further."

Die. Ragna let out a breath as if sneering. It was a surprisingly unsurprising word. This white guy wanted to kill Ragna. He felt that he knew this from something like experience, more than the murderous intent directed at him.

No matter what Ragna said, this man wouldn't back down, and would persistently aim for his neck with that sword. And the difference in strength between himself and this man was so clear that it was desperate.

Was this a memory? Or was it instinct? Either way, it was annoying and irritating.

This guy is stronger than you, even his own sense of reason told him that.

However, even if he was told that, he couldn't turn back. The cauldron, his target, was ahead. It was almost there. If he didn't destroy it before it was too late, the charges he'd piled up so far would be in vain.

"Destiny? Don't screw with me. Even if you say that, I can't just say yes and be killed!" He shouted as if slamming the words down. He felt like he couldn't make a sound otherwise. The pressure blowing from the front made it hard to breathe. Sweat had somehow appeared on his forehead, and his bangs were sticking to his face, making him feel uncomfortable.

Naturally, the white-faced man showed no signs of flinching or pondering. With his sharp gaze still directed at Ragna, he further sharpened his murderous intent, as if his blade was also a part of him, making it even sharper.

"...The world is said to be dreaming." The low words spoken under the mask made Ragna frown.

"Huh? A dream?" He didn't understand what he was talking about.

Perhaps sensing Ragna's fear and desperation to control himself, or perhaps not, the muffled voice continued as if telling a story from a distant past.

"This is a never-ending dream that repeats over and over again. As long as the dream repeats, the world will only repeat tragedy."

The world repeats. Ragna took a sharp breath at the words of the mysterious man whose identity he didn't even know.

Again, something like a memory flashed through his mind.

A strange déjà vu that cuts in as if crossing his field of vision from time to time. Why did it feel like he had a similar experience somewhere other than here?

What if... this man's words were not the flashy metaphor of a great storyteller, but exactly as he said?

What did he do and what did he accomplish in the repeated world? This thought suddenly touched Ragna's consciousness.

"You are the bane of the world and the root of all evil. With my blade, I shall sever the chain of the world." The quiet words slightly gained strength, and the white man's arm moved. He lowered his stance and repositioned the sword, which had been held vertically, into a low thrust.

The sharp tip aimed at Ragna's neck without a single deviation. Ragna's neck tingled with pain at the gaze of the tip that was staring at him. The first attack was a thrust. If he didn't dodge it, he would surely die.

"I am the void, I am the steel, I am the blade. With one swing of my sword, I will reap all sins and destroy evil... I am Hakumen."

"Hakumen?" In the midst of the gradually stronger and more powerful voice, Ragna picked up a name he had heard before.

Hakumen. One of the Six Heroes who was said to have defeated the Black Beast, and the most skilled warrior among the six.

Why was Hakumen here?

"The end has come!"

With a roar, Hakumen, the white man who kicked with his claw-like feet, stepped in quickly and deeply. At the same time as closing the distance, the odachi tore through the air and approached Ragna. Even though he knew it, it was fast.

"Damn!" Praying that he would make it in time, Ragna vigorously swung his own sword. Just before Hakumen's thrust caught Ragna's throat, Ragna's sword with its rugged design deflected the odachi. A dull sound of swords clashing echoed in the inorganic ceiling.

Using his stepping foot as an axis, Hakumen twisted his body. Ragna barely managed to block the kick with his sword and endured it as it slammed straight into him.

"Tch, cough..." Still, the impact struck his stomach, and Ragna spat out bitter saliva onto the floor. "Strong..."

Regrettably, the voice of déjà vu was indeed correct. It wasn't just that their abilities were different, but their power was dimensions apart. He didn't feel like he could win at all.

"Damn it!" He hated being overpowered by overwhelming force.

Ragna swung his sword horizontally. Hakumen lightly jumped and opened the distance.

This place was narrow. It was hard to swing a big weapon around and fight. But at the same time, Hakumen stood in front of Ragna as if not allowing him to even choose to change the location.

Ragna's slash was received by the odachi. Hakumen's sword, Ookami, slid vigorously against Ragna's sword, guiding it downwards. In that gap, the clawed foot took another step.

Ragna's breath caught in his throat from the gouging impact, and his consciousness momentarily drifted away.

"Guh!"

Hakumen's shoulder was embedded in Ragna's chest as he struck. The compressed breath collapsed in his chest, and for a few seconds, he didn't know how to breathe.

At the same time as he straightened his body, Hakumen's sword drew an arc. With smoothness and sharpness as if to cut off the space along with Ragna's body.

Ragna jumped into Hakumen's feet. The sword passed right above his lowered head. He dragged his body and crawled along the floor to escape. He thought it would be a terrible sight. But against this man, there was no such thing as unsightly.

He rolled around to Hakumen's back, reaching the corridor behind him, and Ragna stumbled and ran. He couldn't fight at all. He at least needed more space.

"Running away, Dark One?"

"Shut up, of course I'm running, damn it!"

It was like a game of tag. Feeling the murderous intent approaching from behind, he instinctively jumped to the side, and Hakumen's sword pressure that ran along the ground grazed Ragna and passed by. He should have dodged it. Even so, Ragna's thigh was sharply torn.

"Damn it... Damn it, damn it!"

When he was like this, he really felt like a hunted beast. As soon as he escaped the corridor and turned around, Ragna held his sword in his right hand, putting strength into it as if to retaliate.

Through his right arm, the Azure Grimoire, the sword resonated with power. Its flickering appearance was like an oncoming disaster. With the tip pointing downwards, he slid it along the ground and released it with great power, and the darkness that was born chased after Hakumen in the form of fangs.

The fangs made Hakumen's feet stop. But the next moment, it was scattered by a slash that came down from the upper level.

"Tch!"

It didn't reach. It wasn't enough. Ragna clicked his tongue at the difference between himself and Hakumen, and looked at his right hand.

If he activated the Azure Grimoire, he should still be able to do it. With that thought, he gripped it tightly.

"Restriction 666 released..."

"Tsubaki!"

Hakumen's sword, which had jumped in while twisting his body, slashed Ragna's torso from below as if stroking it. He tried to jump and retreat. But he couldn't jump at once enough to dodge the odachi.

"Gah!"

He was careless. He was blown backwards and fell on the floor from his back. While holding down the laceration running through his chest with his hand, he hurriedly got up.

The wound isn't deep. But a troublesome pain slowed his body.

He somehow dodged the slash that followed, but beyond that was a wall.

A moment of hesitation robbed Ragna of the opportunity to make a retreat. When he noticed and looked up, Hakumen was in front of him, and in his hand was an odachi that was pulled far back.

"It's over. Perish." As soon as he said that, he swung the sword in a horizontal arc.

...But the movement stopped halfway.

"What... is this?"

It was like the still image of a video. But Hakumen certainly existed there with mass.

With a crackle, a sound like scattering sparks was heard. Hakumen's body shook fiercely, as if trying to resist the sparks.

Ragna couldn't grasp the situation. It seemed that an invisible force was capturing Hakumen and trying to suppress him.

"Gah... Phenomenon Intervention?" Hakumen's body sank slightly as if he couldn't bear the weight. But the hero in white endured even greater indignity. Unable to hold it up any longer, he muttered in a muffled voice, his head bowed. "I... will never... repeat it again..."

The low voice squeezed out from his whole body, sounding resentful. With deep remorse and heavy despair, Hakumen stiffened his distorting body. Sparks scattered around the area, followed by a series of sounds like circuits short-circuiting one after another. The hand, still gripping the odachi, lifted as if to subdue an invisible force suppressing it.

"Don't get in my way, grimalkin!" Hakumen roared, swinging his sword with a mighty force. The sword's pressure alone would have torn human flesh just by grazing it.

That single blow shook the underground floor violently as if splitting the ground, cutting through the ceiling, walls, and floor with the tip. Then, a powerful gust of wind blew, slashing everything around it.

"Whoa!"

That was terrible. It was a mess. Ragna lowered his body and used his sword as a shield to protect himself from the wild impact.

Before long, the vibration subsided. When he saw Hakumen and the surroundings from the shadow of his sword, Ragna lost his words and turned pale involuntarily.

Centered around the white oni holding his odachi, countless cracks spread in all directions. At his clawed feet, the slashes from his own attacks were deeply engraved. Fearfully, Ragna looked around to find them on the wall not far from himself, and when he looked up, they spread from there to the ceiling.

Ragna had no time to check how deep the slash had cut into the wall. Now he realized what he is facing.

Hakumen of the Six Heroes. The hero who defeated the Black Beast. Even without experiencing it firsthand, his strength was beyond measure.

Even so, it must have been a fierce struggle. Hakumen's arms hung down limply, his odachi dragged its tip, and his open legs seemed to barely support him. With heavy breathing and his shoulders rising and falling, his white face lifted towards Ragna.

"Dark One..."

His voice was one of resentment.

Ragna thought it was over. But their one-sided confrontation was interrupted by a noisy sound that rose from far behind.

"What?"

Something collapsed at a height near the ceiling, and along with it, a large object fell to the floor.

With a gasp, Ragna looked up at Hakumen's slash that had cut through the ceiling. The gouged scratch marks continue endlessly. It must have cut through the wall, through the bedrock in the back, and then whatever was beyond that.

In other words, it cut off part of the elevator.

Looking up, he saw that the ceiling near the floor above had collapsed as if it had been scraped away, revealing a cylindrical structure. The cylindrical structure had been cut open on its side by something sharp, and was turned outwards as if it had spewed something out.

The ejected material lay scattered on the floor. Along with numerous rocks and metal fragments, the elevator car was smashed to pieces.

Within the wreckage, there was a figure lying motionless.

"A person?" Something white moved next to Ragna, who was doubting his eyes. It was Hakumen.

(At a time like this...) He thought, turning around and bracing himself, but then Ragna witnessed an unbelievable sight.

Hakumen was leaning over the railing of the floor below, staring intently at the fallen elevator. Of course, it was impossible to tell where his gaze was directed from his featureless mask. But he was definitely staring intently at the woman who had fallen.

He muttered, stunned and somewhat bewildered.

"That... that girl... is different..." His voice was as weak as a lie. It was as if he had forgotten his soul somewhere; he was empty. "Why..."

Seizing his chance, Ragna quickly raised his right hand and activated the grimoire.

"Restriction 666 released, dimensional imaginary number formed! Blazblue, activate!" At Ragna's voice, Hakumen turned around.

But it was too late. His right hand, brimming with its original power, channeled that power into the sword, transforming its shape into that of a scythe. The darkness that gathered like a fountain engulfed the surroundings.

"Uaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" With all the might and power he could muster, Ragna slammed the scythe of darkness into Hakumen.

The darkness overflowed along with the slash, engulfing Hakumen's white body and effortlessly blowing him away. The darkness continued its pursuit, violently raining down on Hakumen as if pinning him to the wall it struck.

The destructive sound continued dully, and Ragna's vision and Hakumen's body were covered in darkness.

"Haa... Haa... Haa, don't... Don't you dare look away..." The sword, which had returned from the scythe to its usual form, felt heavy, and the arm that swung it couldn't be lifted immediately.

Gasping for breath, Ragna glared at the white oni who was embedded in the wall and motionless.

(Don't move.) He prayed.

Fortunately, Hakumen did not move, as if he were a mechanical doll whose switch had been turned off. His tall body was half-submerged in the wall and bedrock.

(If he doesn't move, that's fine.) He didn't intend to bother with him any further.

More importantly, he was worried about the woman who had fallen with the elevator. She was near the cauldron. If she stayed in a place like that...

"Wait, that girl..."

The woman, who had been unconscious, had somehow gotten up and moved to in front of the cauldron.

Judging by her clothes, she was a soldier of the NOL. Fortunately, the cauldron was still closed, so it was fine, but if it were to open...

"Tch!"

As if reading Ragna's mind, a sinking tremor surged through the underground floor. He was momentarily confused by what had happened. The dimly lit underground floor was becoming brighter, as if light had entered from somewhere. The light source... was the cauldron.

"Damn it!"

The main culprit of the earth-shaking rumble that shook the entire underground, the cauldron, was now about to open the gate it held in its center.

2

A low vibration sound briefly shook the small hall deep underground and the border of the corridor leading beyond it. Then, several explosive crashes echoed... and then, a part of the hall's wall, which had been silently present even during the previous battle, shattered and collapsed.

The opening that was created was quite large for a hole meant for one person.

As if parting the rubble that was falling down, a large man, fitting the massive hole, forcefully entered the hall from the opening.

He was probably close to two and a half meters tall. On top of that, his body was covered in rock-like, bulging muscles, making him look rugged and sturdy at first glance. His clothes were strangely reddish, and fang-like protrusions jutted upward from his tightly closed mouth. On his arms, which were as thick as logs, there were ominous devices like armlets or shackles. With the power of these devices, he had made his way here through his own unique route.

This man with a demonic appearance was TR-0009 Iron Tager. He was a cyborg soldier created with special gene manipulation, belonging to Sector Seven - a research institution that, while originally within the NOL, broke away due to a decisive difference in policy and became independent to change the world with its own values.

Escaping from the cramped hole, Tager found the white-clad man who had created a magnificent crack in the wall and collapsed at the end of the corridor. He put his equally huge hand to his ear.

A small electronic sound. When the communication connected, he calmly reported to his superior on the other side.

"Found him. Retrieving him immediately."

"Alright. Be careful. It would be unbearable if he escaped again." From the other side of the communicator attached to his ear, a woman's voice, slightly irritated, could be heard. The voice belonged to Kokonoe, a researcher at Sector Seven and Tager's creator.

"Seriously... after all the trouble we went through to pull him up from the Boundary, he's always doing whatever he wants."

"What do you want to do? Return immediately?"

"No, just send him over here with the transfer device first. You have two more jobs to do."

"Two?"

While asking, Tager began working beside the communication. What he took out was a device about the size of his palm. When activated, it recognized Hakumen, who showed no reaction at all. While monitoring his process, Kokonoe spoke from the other side of the communicator.

"One is to recover the devices scattered throughout Kagutsuchi to forcibly interfere with that man. You can remotely detonate them, but it took a considerable amount of time and effort to make them. Collect as many as you can."

"Understood. What's the other?"

"There's something I want you to see." Kokonoe's voice suddenly became heavy and somber. Unable to read that emotion, Tager hesitated about what to say. In the end, he returned the usual words.

"Understood. Please give me the instructions."

Without asking about the details or objecting to the vague instructions, he sent a submissive reply, and Tager finished preparing the device with a dexterity that seemed ill-suited to his large body and thick fingers.

"Transfer preparation complete."

"Understood."

The small device carried the white oni to Kokonoe, the developer, while Tager, who remained behind, began cleaning up to stabilize the surrounding dimensions and minimize the impact.

3

Noel's eyelids fluttered at the sensation of a small fragment falling on her cheek.

Slowly, she tried to open her eyes. She couldn't understand where she was, what had happened to her, or the impact of being thrown around in her dazed state.

There was no way she could understand. That while descending underground, the elevator and wall were torn apart by the aftershocks of a flying slash, and she was blown all the way here along with the device she was riding on.

All she remembered was the sudden, tremendous shock that attacked her, the terrifying feeling of floating, and then the shock of being thrown somewhere. That was all.

"It... hurts..."

If she had suffered such an ordeal, it wouldn't have been strange if she had died.

But fortunately, the protective Ars Magus applied to the elevator acted as a cushion. Although she had small cuts, scratches, and bruises here and there, she miraculously had no injuries that would prevent her from moving.

Instead, the elevator Noel was riding on was so badly broken that she thought it would never be used again.

Removing a piece of the elevator that was pressing down on her back, Noel got up and stood up. Shaking off the fragments of broken elevator and building materials that covered her clothes, fine metal particles scattered like dust and fell to the floor.

"Where is this?"

While pressing down on the slightly deep cut on her shoulder to stop the bleeding, Noel took a step, then another, away from the scattered debris and moved forward. Could this be an underground research lab? It was quite different from what she had imagined.

It was wide and empty, the ceiling was high... and a tremendously large device was enthroned as if it were the main object in the space. Beyond the device, there was something that looked like a mouth with a shape like overlapping wings. Noel knew at a glance that it would surely open.

Why was that? Noel tilted her head repeatedly as she walked to the front so that she could see the device better.

She didn't know such a place. She didn't even know it existed, there was no way she could know. And yet...

"I... know this...?"

No, that's not right, maybe it wasn't this. But she couldn't shake the feeling that she had seen something very similar. When and where did she see it? Certainly...

"Kya!?"

Interrupting Noel's thoughts, the surroundings suddenly began to vibrate dully. It gradually grew larger, eventually swelling to the point where Noel could barely stand.

"Wh-what!?"

Barely managing to keep from falling over, Noel fearfully looked around. She didn't know what was happening, but it was clear that something was happening. The bare skin on her arms instantly broke out in goosebumps.

No. Her mind was trying to recall something, but it stopped. She didn't want to be here. Because this place was...

Amidst the low rumbling, another vibration mixed in. The source of the sound was right beside her. Noel's scream caught in her throat as she turned around.

It was that device. Towering over Noel, and seemingly extending far below as well, in the center of the impossibly huge device, the part that looked like folded wings, which had been closed until just now, was slowly beginning to open.

From the gradually widening gap, what slipped out was a dazzling crimson light, like a mixture of blazing flames and molten lava. Noel felt her consciousness being drawn in by that color, by the swirling texture.

"Ah... ah..." Whether her legs were trembling, or she was captivated, she couldn't move from the spot. As she stood there, within Noel's wide green eyes, the closed wings fully opened.

The place that had completely opened its mouth was a cauldron. The swirling lava-like substance inside was the Boundary. A world that people constantly sought and reached out for, a world that was not this one. A place that contained all kinds of information, knowledge, memories, time, and space.

Noel didn't know such things. She was simply terrified by the sight before her, unable to believe it... unable to speak.

The contents of the cauldron stirred, pulsating as if alive. As if being born from that fetal movement, the figure of a young girl emerged from within the Boundary.

It was a slender girl. She had white hair tied into long braids, and wore a white cape over a form-fitting bodysuit. Lightly spreading her hands, her large, seemingly innocent eyes were veiled by lowered eyelids. Her pale skin, which seemed to avoid the color of the flames from below, was almost sickly, and her figure appeared very... nostalgic to Noel.

A roar, as if fanning the swirling flames within the furnace, could be heard.

With an aura as if commanding these sounds, the girl floated, moving without being pulled up by anything, nor walking on anything. In front of Noel, at the edge of the opening cauldron, she softly landed barefoot without a sound.

After a brief pause, the girl lifted her eyelids. She wore an eyepatch on her face, concealing only her right eye. The color of her open left eye was red. A beautiful, yet somewhat ominous red.

"You are..."

Staring at the girl who emerged from the cauldron, Noel's trembling voice was hoarse.

Perhaps hearing that voice, the girl with white hair and clothes raised her drowsy, distant eyes from within the depths of her long braids and looked at Noel.

Their gazes met. At that instant, something surged up from the depths of Noel's being like a raging torrent. The force was so overwhelming that she felt a dizzying illusion of impact. It rushed up to her head at once, robbing Noel of her thoughts, her senses, and her emotions.

"Loading... loading, loading. Checking all functions for normality. Murakumo, commencing activation." The white girl spoke in an emotionless voice.

As if lured by that voice, Noel's mouth moved on its own accord.

"Target's activation acknowledged. Target recognized as... 13th Unit. Shifting to combat mode."

Midway through her words, Noel regained consciousness as if a thin rope that had been veiling her vision had been brushed away. Her eyes, which had lost their brilliance, now held a human-like confusion, and Noel staggered backward.

"What- what was that just now? What did I..."

(I mustn't understand, I mustn't comprehend, I mustn't recognize.)

Clinging to the voice within her that was denying and rejecting, Noel desperately tried to avert her eyes from the white girl.

Ignoring Noel, the white girl continued speaking in a machine-like manner.

"Target recognized as the same entity. Target will be... eliminated."

"Huh?" Noel weakly voiced her question. If she hadn't misheard, she had just said "eliminated." Who? In this case, besides that girl, there was no one else standing here but herself.

While she was thinking this, a huge, pale blue sword flew in from somewhere and pierced the white girl's back. The sword immediately unfolded. Complex mechanisms changed shape one after another, and in response, the girl's attire also changed shape.

The transformed parts stripped the white cape from the girl and gave her eight wing-like swords, the hands and feet of the bodysuit gained sword-like decorations, and the eye patch was replaced by a large headgear.

Within seconds, the girl had transformed into a living combat weapon. Her expressionless, doll-like face found Noel through the headgear and posed as if reaching out her hand. But that was the same as pointing the tip of the blade attached to her arm.

"Ah... no..."

What the white girl was indicating was murderous intent. The machine-like voice that said "eliminate" told Noel what was about to happen to her.

But her body wouldn't move. Of course, she was scared of the pure murderous intent of the girl in front of her, but more than that, she felt like she was seeing something very terrifying, and her legs trembled, her hands trembled.

"Die." The white-haired girl coldly declared, the eight swords floating around her simultaneously releasing towards Noel. There was no mercy in the attack. The sharp tips of the incoming blades accurately targeted Noel's vital points, aiming to kill the target without fail.

(I have to avoid them. I have to escape... I have to fight.)

As if a predetermined program was running, thoughts automatically began to move within Noel's head.

"Attack confirmed. Evading."

Her legs, which had been frozen until then, moved with a spring-like force, lightly carrying Noel's body backward. She quickly spun in the air and, even before landing, readied the guns in both hands and fired.

The two magic rounds fired in succession crossed the space and exploded to the left and right of the white girl. The girl's white hair fluttered greatly from the damage, and the sword's legs staggered slightly.

"Minor damage... No problem." The expression beneath the headgear barely moved; the girl murmured emotionless words as if whispering.

At the same time, she slid forward on the floor and swung her slender arm, followed by the eight swords. The swords moved as if slashing Noel, diagonally and vertically, in line with her arm's movements. However, Noel blocked and defended against this with her long gun barrel, and this time, the feather-like swords danced as if scooping up her feet.

The white girl's movements were fast and light. The continuous attacks unleashed from the swords she wore and her own legs were relentless, cutting into Noel one after another.

But Noel was just as light and fast. She used her gun barrels to parry the eight consecutive attacks that swept her feet, then instantly leaped, passing over the girl's head as she lowered her body and circled around to her back.

It was a close-range shot. Using her body itself as a weapon, Noel's hand struck the white girl's head with the grip of her Nox Nyctores, the Arcus Diabolus: Bolverk. Not stopping with one blow, she continued to strike her back with the gun barrel, and fired a shot at her feet as she tried to stand up.

Noel's dazzling gunplay was somehow similar to the white-haired girl's continuous attacks. The white-haired girl widened the distance again with a low retreat. When she stretched out both hands into the air, the eight swords followed and flew towards Noel.

The same movement as before. Noel's mind predicted the attack trajectory.

"Useless." Her finger pulled the trigger without hesitation, and the fired Ars Magus round accurately pierced the eight swords.

However, it probably wasn't such a simple mechanism that would be silenced by that. As the girl staring at Noel swung her arm, the struck swords smoothly returned to the side of her white bodysuit, protecting her body.

"Target's possession of phenomena weapons confirmed. Shifting combat level." The girl's headgear flashed red lights as if engraving something.

That quiet pause gave Noel back her reason. Her green eyes, which had been staring at the white girl with unwavering focus until then, suddenly showed anxiety and lost strength. Her lips were trembling. Her knees and fingertips also trembled, as if being pulled along.

"Just now... what was I..." What was I doing?

The question instantly turned into agitation, and the agitation immediately turned into fear.

In that short time, where were Noel's thoughts and consciousness of herself? Whose... *what* thoughts were there?

The feeling of being taken over by someone else's thoughts and being moved around against her will was horrifying. And yet, Noel's consciousness now, in this abnormal state... wasn't it calmly observing?

As if that was the original her.

"N-no... that's wrong. I- I didn't do anything..." Her trembling lips once again moved on their own. But this time, what leaked out wasn't the emotionless, machine-like murmur from before, but Noel's own voice, frightened and confused. Her whole body was about to lose strength. Her legs trembled terribly, and she couldn't stand.

Then—

"This is the end." The girl's emotionless voice was heard.

Noel gasped and looked up. The swords around the white girl, following her outstretched arm and the girl's thoughts, spread out in all directions and were released.

But the swords, which seemed to have been released randomly, crossed the space and spread out around Noel, their tips aimed at her... converging as they rained down.

"Ah..."

It was too late. Her body shrank, and a frightened scream echoed in her throat.

(Help me...)

Even though she knew there was no one there, Noel's unconscious mind called out in a tearful voice.

(Help me... Brother...)

The next moment she involuntarily closed her eyes, Noel saw a dazzling and nostalgic scene behind her eyelids.

It was an afternoon when warm sunlight streamed in through the window.

There was someone who stroked her feverish forehead.

Hard, golden hair, and strong, gentle green eyes that smiled.

That person had always stroked her head.

She loved that hand very much.

The eight blades that were released pierced not the girl's graceful body, but the toned body of a man.

On the cold, hard floor, a sound of dripping, heavier than water, echoed. While listening to the irregular sound...

...A man, Ragna, who jumped in as if interrupting, took a staggering step back.

"Ugh..." Blood flowed out. Blood mixed with saliva spilled onto the floor. Feeling the sensation of the sword deeply piercing his body, Ragna bitterly exhaled. "Tch... I messed up."

Saying that, he supported his faltering legs, which were pierced by the blade in his stomach and legs, using the sword as a crutch.

Of the eight swords released by the white girl, five were knocked down to the floor. But the remaining three pierced Ragna's body from front to back as he stood in the way, offering himself as a shield.

It seemed it was a little too late to deflect everything.

"Wh-why..."

Behind him, he heard the girl's trembling voice.

"Huh?" Ragna reluctantly turned his head.

There, of course, was the girl soldier, Noel, wearing the blue and white uniform. Her arm, which she had raised to protect herself, remained as it was, and she was trembling with fear and confusion, unable to fully grasp the situation that had happened before her eyes. Her wide-open green eyes were filled with tears, and she stared at the slender sword protruding from Ragna's back as if seeing something unbelievable.

"Why did you protect me?"

"...I don't know. When I saw you about to be killed, my body moved on its own," Ragna replied, spitting it out.

He had no intention of putting on airs. In fact, that was all there was to it. He had already run out the moment he saw it. He didn't have time to think about what would happen as a result of jumping in.

But if there was a special reason... he thought without saying it, it might be because they resembled each other.

He realized after protecting her. He didn't know where she came from or what her intentions were, but this girl soldier who was carelessly walking alone in front of the cauldron... resembled his sister.

The pale skin, the eyebrows, the eyes, the muscles, the color of her cheeks, the way she felt. Even the soft voice that came out of her mouth evoked memories that he had lost many years ago.

He even thought that she might be his sister herself, who had been taken away the night the church burned down.

"Ragna, you've finally come to see Nu!"

Identifying herself as Nu, the white girl who released the sword abandoned the emotionless attitude she had shown towards Noel, as if it were a lie, and wore an innocent, full smile.

With a small sound, only the headgear that covered Nu's eyes came off. The moment that happened, Ragna grimaced at something different from the pain that pierced his body.

"Nu's been thinking about Ragna all the time, all the time, all the time. I wanted to see you first thing when I woke up. You're late, Ragna!" Lightly lifting the tips of her blade-shaped toes from the floor, Nu chuckled as if enjoying herself.

It was obvious when she took off her headgear. With white hair and red eyes, Nu also closely resembled Ragna's sister, though the colors were different.

No, it wasn't just that they resembled each other. There were slight differences in their gestures, so the impressions were somewhat different... but they had the same face.

That meant that Noel and Nu also had the same face.

"It's like I'm having a nightmare..."

The situation of being caught between a soldier of the NOL who had the same face as his sister, and a girl refined by the cauldron who had the same face as his sister, was somehow eerie.

Grumbling bitterly, Ragna grabbed one of the swords piercing his abdomen. He put strength into trying to pull it out.

"Fufufu, don't be so rough, Ragna. Don't worry, I'll pull it out for you soon." Nu said in a cheerful, spoiled voice, stroking the air with her slender white arm. Then, the swords that Ragna had knocked down and scattered on the floor floated up and returned to Nu. Similarly, the three swords that had been in his abdomen also came out of him in one breath, dripping red drops as they returned to Nu.

Ragna couldn't bear having them pulled out. His flesh was cut again by the three swords that simultaneously came out, and blood like a lump overflowed from his stomach.

"It looks painful... Are you okay, Ragna?" Nu tilted her head worriedly, while dancing eight blades around herself.

"Of course I'm not okay..."

With her utterly innocent appearance, it was foolish to even retort. The voice he returned was muddled by the blood rising up, and as soon as he finished speaking, Ragna had to spit out the blood that had welled up.

"Don't get carried away just because you've been refined... I'm going to destroy you!"

"That's fine. Because Nu belongs to Ragna. Break me, mess me up... Fufufu, ahahahaha!" Laughing loudly, Nu put on her headgear again. When she swung her arm as if hugging the sky, the eight swords once again jumped towards Ragna.

"Damn it!" Releasing his hand from his stomach, which was gushing blood with each heartbeat, Ragna knocked down Nu's oncoming swords.

If he dodged, Noel would be behind him. Even if he demanded that she dodge in a hurry, he couldn't imagine that the completely frightened soldier could do such a thing.

So he knocked down all of them. With such spirit, he swung his sword at his feet, and a jet-black sword protruded out like a wave.

"Oh no!" He deflected it with his sword, and jumped away from the impact. But as if waiting for that action, Nu, who had jumped high at some point, cut into Ragna's shoulder with her legs, which had become swords.

"Gah!" He couldn't react to that at all. He staggered from the unavoidable slash, but he couldn't just be beaten, so he slashed upwards from below.

"Kyaa!" Ragna's slash caught Nu's torso.

Nu's landing was disrupted by the heavy impact. The impact must have been absorbed by the suit. But there was damage, and Nu hugged her stomach and crouched on the spot.

"Drop dead!"

Not wanting to miss the chance for a follow-up attack, Ragna raised his sword high and swung it down to decapitate the girl.

Or so it should have been, but suddenly the air around Ragna became heavy, and he couldn't move.

"What? A gravity field!"

An intense gravity had been generated only around Ragna. If he lost his concentration, he would slam into the ground. As he desperately resisted this power... the eight swords once again pierced Ragna's body, this time from all sides at once.

He thought he heard a scream, probably Noel's, from far behind. But he couldn't respond to it anymore.

"You... bitch..."

He had to get out of this gravity field somehow. Ragna thrust his sword into the floor and struggled. But then—

"No, Ragna." Nu jumped and spun in the air, going behind Ragna. She wrapped her lithe arms around his neck. She brought her pink lips close to his ear and whispered sweetly. "Nu can't wait any longer. I want to become one with Ragna soon. Right now..."

As the tempting voice finished. A dull impact pierced Ragna's abdomen.

"Gaaaah!" Stiffening his body, which could barely move, Ragna lowered his gaze and looked at his own stomach. There, a far too thick and large acupuncture needle pierced straight through. From Nu's back, through her body, and together, they were tethered to Ragna's body.

The two were indeed connected as Nu had wished, becoming one.

(Ah...)

Ragna let out a sigh. In addition to the gravity field, it was probably because he had lost a lot of blood. His body was completely immobile.

Ragna's purpose was to destroy the cauldron and also destroy Nu.

Nu was a Boundary Interface Prime Field Device. She was a doll based on Ragna's sister, Saya, created for people to touch the Boundary and gain its power. That's why she had the same appearance as his sister.

While traveling around the world and destroying the cauldrons, Ragna's purpose was to destroy this Prime Field Device.

With this doll, people could easily reach out to the Boundary. Above all, they had kidnapped his sister and manipulated her as they pleased, creating a doll based on her, and used it as a tool to investigate the Boundary. There was no way he could leave even one of these things behind.

He had destroyed two of them so far. They were still in the state before the refining was completed, and were only unconscious dolls. So... if he only considered the work involved, it was easy, if he didn't look at the reality of killing a defenseless girl who had the same face as his sister.

He had intended to deal with the Kagutsuchi branch the same way.

"Nothing ever goes right..."

He was stopped by his brother, obstructed by a man calling himself one of the Six Heroes, the refining of the Prime Field Device was completed, and he even suffered a deep wound because of unnecessary meddling. As a result, he couldn't even fight properly and ended up like this.

(Pathetic...)

He felt empty at the thought that he would be cut off halfway. Did this hand accomplish anything? Did this hand create anything?

He felt empty, like all he had ever done was rage, destroy, and kill...

"Now we'll be together... forever." Nu's spoiled voice was heard near his ear. This was no joke. He wanted to push her away, shake her off, and take hold of his sword once more. But... he no longer had the strength to pull out the sword that connected Nu and himself. "Now, Ragna, let's go. Let's melt together as one... and destroy the world together."

Singing happily, Nu kicked off the floor with her sharp toes.

The bodies of Ragna and Nu, connected together, floated up and then fell.

Into the Boundary where the all-consuming flames swirled.

That was the end of everything.

It should have been over.

"Don't give up."

A voice was heard. The one who called out was... his sister's voice.

It was a nostalgic voice.

When they were still in the church. The voice he always heard beside him during the time they spent reading books together, taking naps, and harvesting vegetables from the field.

Lured by the nostalgia, Ragna opened his eyes. And immediately, he found it and realized.

"Don't give up!" There was Noel shouting, her face covered in tears. Clinging to the edge of the cauldron, she stretched out her other arm with all her might, desperately grabbing Ragna's arm, shouting until her throat was hoarse. "Reach out your hand, quickly!!"

He was startled. His body, which had been heavy and immobile until then, suddenly moved.

There was no way Noel's slender arms could support Ragna's weight forever. Strongly pulling the arm of Noel, who was desperately holding on, he forcibly lifted his own body, and with that momentum, Ragna grabbed the edge of the cauldron with his free hand.

(I won't fall down, I won't end here.) Those thoughts came to his mind.

That was when-

"Eh?" He heard the girl's bewildered voice, and something slipped out of Ragna's body along with her. It didn't take long for him to realize that it was Nu's greatsword.

The sword that connected them through Nu's back didn't have the power to stop Ragna's body from clinging to the edge. It slipped out with the same smoothness as when it pierced him... and the greatsword fell along with its owner, Nu.

"Rag..."

Unable to understand. Nu called out his name, and her body was easily swallowed into the swirling flames of the Boundary.

And... this time, it was truly over.

4

Ragna couldn't remember how he got there.

His body, which should have fallen into the cauldron and been swallowed by the Boundary, was now slumped against the cold wall in a corner of the research facility under Kagutsuchi.
His rough breathing continued, and his head was still dizzy. His whole body was exhausted to the point where he already felt distant, and his arms and legs hung powerlessly. How long had he been like that?

At the calling voice, Ragna raised his eyelids, which he seemed to have closed at some point. There, as he had expected, was the soldier girl with blonde hair, wearing the soldier's uniform, her face contorted as if she was about to cry at any moment.

"Yo." Her face was so pathetic that Ragna gave a light chuckle and called out to her.

Instantly, Noel's face became even more pathetic and distorted, and she began crying uncontrollably, as if she couldn't bear it any longer.

"I'm glad. You're alive... you're alive..." Looking at the seated Ragna from the side, Noel supported him with both hands, her shoulders shaking with sobs as her body seemed ready to lose its strength from relief.

The dripping tears warmed Ragna's cheeks. Neither cold nor lukewarm, the drops of human body temperature were somewhat ticklish.

"You... I didn't notice because you were wearing a hat earlier... your hair's long." His mind wasn't working, and only his thoughts came out of his mouth.

As expected, or rather, as it should be, Noel, who had been crying until then, looked up sternly and began scolding him.

"T-this isn't the time for that! H-how worried do you think I was? You fell into such a strange place, and if you fell in there, you'd never be able to come back again!? And yet... and yet..."

Again, tears welled up and wet Noel's white cheeks.

Perhaps it was unintentional. Noel made fists with her trembling hands and hit Ragna in the chest, as if to vent her unbearable sadness and anger.

"Idiot... idiot idiot idiot idiot idiot idiot idiot idiot!!"

"Whoa, hey, that hurts, don't hit me!"

"But, but...!"

From there on, words no longer formed, and Noel slumped down, wiping away the overflowing tears with both hands, crying and screaming like a child. She did that for a while, wailing and sobbing at the top of her lungs. Then, suddenly, her tears subsided, and a slight weight leaned against Ragna's shoulder.

Ragna, who had been listening to "idiot" mixed with tears all this time, turned around and was utterly dumbfounded. No, it would be more accurate to say he was impressed.

Noel, who had been crying until just now, had completely relaxed her body and was leaning against his shoulder, fast asleep. Her long hair swayed and moved on her slender shoulders, following her breathing. Her eyes were swollen red from rubbing them so many times. Occasionally, mixed with her breathing, her thin chest bounced with sobbing breaths.

"She's crying even in her dreams? Seriously?" Ragna muttered, twisting his lips into a wry smile. "Still..."

Taking advantage of the fact that she was asleep, Ragna stared intently at Noel's face, which was leaning against him, and lowered his eyebrows.

"She really does look like her."

The two Prime Field Devices he had destroyed so far, and Nu from earlier, were of course similar, but this soldier girl was outstandingly similar to his sister, Saya.

That was why, when she showed such behavior... like a scene from a long time ago, he couldn't help but feel bewildered. He didn't know what kind of face he should make or how he should sit beside her.

As if interrupting such a drowsy time, the space in front of Ragna warped. The faint scent of a different fragrance and a pale, familiar face appeared by teleportation.

"You've worked hard. It was an unexpected conclusion that she would inherit the Azure."

A girl with crimson eyes, her black dress and golden hair dancing in the gently swirling wind. It was Rachel Alucard. However, her familiars, Nago and Gii, whom she always brought with her, were nowhere to be seen. She was unusually alone.

"You, rabbit!?"

Not expecting her to appear in such a place, Ragna tried to get up as if he had been bounced. But before he could completely separate his back from the wall, Rachel put her index finger to her lips and silenced the boorish man.

"Be quiet. She'll wake up."

"But..." At Rachel's words, which sounded like a reprimand, Ragna gasped and closed his mouth. He awkwardly glanced sideways, feeling embarrassed, but the face leaning against him remained unchanged, still fast asleep without any tension. He involuntarily let out a sigh, wondering why he was being so considerate.

Rachel, who had been watching the series of his gestures and changes in expression, raised her lips with a mix of astonishment under her pressed index finger.

"Honestly, you're an unpredictable man. You don't have a single bit of etiquette towards a lady."

"Shut up.I don't care about that. More importantly, what's going on this time? And what were you talking about just now, 'inheriting the Azure'?"

(You're talking to me like I'm a child or an idiot.) Ragna cursed inwardly, glaring up at Rachel.

The Azure. Was it different from the "Azure Grimoire"? Then there was the word "inherit." He didn't understand the meaning at all.

"Oh, you were listening properly. I'm impressed."

But she knew he didn't understand the meaning. Ragna hunched over and lowered his head at the red eyes that seemed to read his mind.

"Well, thanks. Never mind that, just explain it to me quickly. But make it as easy to understand as possible. Right now, my head is pretty foggy, so if you talk about something difficult, I won't be able to understand it as well as usual."

"You're saying you understand a little bit normally, then?"

"I do a little bit, don't I!" Ragna raised his voice as if biting back, and Rachel showed him her index finger with a "shush" gesture. That made Ragna choke and pull back. He was extremely displeased with himself for doing so.

Rachel took a breath, looked at Noel with an unusually gentle gaze, and opened her mouth.

"Inheriting the Azure means, in other words, succeeding the Azure. This child was chosen as the true Successor of the Azure."

"This child... you mean her?" Ragna glanced at the girl who was leaning on his shoulder, sleeping peacefully and snoring.

"Yes, that's right. By this child helping you, after you fell into the cauldron, the world was able to escape from the eternally continuing loop." After this introduction, Rachel began to speak slowly, as if telling an old tale. "The world, you know, has repeated the same history... the same story over and over and over again."

It was a story. A story that Rachel, who had lived for a long time, had been watching with her red eyes.

It began a hundred years ago, always, from the point when a monster called the Black Beast appeared from the Boundary.

The Black Beast would eventually be defeated by six heroes, and the world would gradually heal its wounded civilization over a hundred years.

And now, on December 31, 2199, Ragna appeared in the 13th Hierarchical City of Kagutsuchi, failed to destroy the underground cauldron, and by falling into the cauldron with the Prime Field Device... the world would be reset.

And again, on December 31, 2099, the Black Beast was born, the Six Heroes defeated it, humanity prospered again, and Ragna appeared in Kagutsuchi again.

Rachel didn't know how many times she had repeated that hundred years. But after seeing those hundred years many times, she had now witnessed the first time that Ragna didn't fall into the cauldron, welcoming the year 2200.

"Is that... something amazing?" Ragna asked. He understood vaguely, but he still didn't really understand. Rachel playfully shrugged her shoulders.

"Well, it depends. If you think it's amazing, it's amazing, and if you think it's normal, it's normal."

"That's why I told you to stop being so incomprehensible..."

He was getting more and more confused.

As Ragna grumbled and scratched his head, Rachel narrowed her eyes and gazed at him. Then she crouched down in front of the sleeping Noel and continued while looking at her carefree sleeping face.

"To put it simply about the Successor of the Azure... well, how should I put it, it's like a new possibility born in the world. Without this child, the world would still be repeating the loop. This

child showed the possibility of a new world... the possibility of the Azure. That's why the world was able to move forward."

"I still don't understand."

"You're an idiot."

"Shut up. But..."

He couldn't argue back. But Ragna looked down at Noel and lowered his eyebrows in trouble.

If this girl had given the world a future, then this girl had also given him a future at the same time. With these slender arms.

"I understand that she helped me a lot."

Despite being a soldier with a fine gun, she was a weak girl who suddenly became unable to move and cowered in fear in front of Nu.

And yet, when Ragna was about to fall into the cauldron, she somehow ran out and reached out her hand, knowing it was reckless.

She must have a cowardly personality. She must have been scared at that time. Her legs must have been trembling, and she must have felt like her heart was about to stop when she thought about what would happen if she fell.

But this soldier... Noel, reached out her hand.

Rachel let out a sigh at Ragna's words. But it was different from being exasperated or making fun of him; it felt like a warmer sigh.

"It's no use talking about anything more difficult than this. You wouldn't understand it right now. So, let's stop here. I'll explain again when we have another chance... to that child as well."

Rachel's face as she spoke was somewhat joyful. Ragna was impressed that she could make such a face. It was a rare and precious face that he didn't often see.

However, as Ragna blinked a few times, Rachel returned to her usual composed vampire princess expression, smoothed out her dress, and stood up. The swirling scent of roses made him forget that it was a cramped underground research lab.

"Stay there and rest for a while longer. I have some business to take care of. When I return, I'll send you up to the surface."

"You're being quite kind today."

Until now, even if she knew that Ragna was going to raid the branch, she had never once helped him escape or infiltrate. Ragna said it jokingly, intending it as a little revenge for his everyday grievances.

Letting her two-tied golden hair flutter in the swirling wind, Rachel smiled gracefully within the rose-colored magic circle she had deployed. As if saying she would generously forgive Ragna's remark.

"Be grateful and crawl." With a cheerful tone, Rachel vanished with the sound of the wind blowing.

Only Ragna and Noel were left behind.

Noel's tears in her dream seemed to have stopped, and she was now just sleeping soundly and peacefully. She probably wouldn't wake up for a while.

Even if Rachel hadn't told him to, it seemed he would be forced to stay in this position for a while longer.

"...Well, not that I could move right away anyway."

His whole body felt heavy with immense fatigue and deep wounds. Most of all, he was drained and didn't think he could stand.

He couldn't stay by Noel's side for too long because of the Azure Grimoire's insatiable hunger for life force, but...

A little longer should be alright.

Ragna gently repositioned Noel's head, which was about to slip off his shoulder, then let out a deep breath and looked up at the ceiling.

5

A rose-scented wind swept through.

With the moon, filled with light to the brim of a silver basin, behind her, Rachel was in the night sky. High, high up. So high she almost reached the moon.

Below her, she could see the vast expanse of land and the 13th Hierarchical City of Kagutsuchi. The summit of the NOL branch, which had conquered the top of the high mountain, was a lovely miniature far below from Rachel's current position.

Not a single person could be seen even as dots.

Commanding the night wind that raged at such a high altitude, Rachel looked up. There was only a deep, dark night. But what Rachel was looking at was even beyond that, the end of the sky beyond this planet, the universe.

There, something nostalgic for Rachel was floating.

Could it be seen in her wide open eyes? Far enough away to see the land below as a planet, a giant coffin floating in the sea of space was opening its mouth, trying to awaken the giant sleeping inside.

The giant, bound by the coffin and sealed too firmly, once had a form like a human shadow. But now, as it was being awakened and emerging from the coffin, its body was like an assembly of countless magical patterns and alchemical devices.

In its center, several magic circles floated up. They began to rotate one after another, like gears influencing each other, and energy rapidly gathered in the center.

The target was the lower part overlooked by the coffin, a corner of the planet, a certain city. It was a huge Hierarchical City given the number thirteen.

A serious irregularity had occurred there. Therefore, it would be destroyed. That was the role given to this giant.

That was why Rachel was waiting for it in the sky.

A wind that didn't exist in space fluttered Rachel's dress, her hair, and her large ribbon. But the wind never hurt or disturbed Rachel.

Standing serenely on the rough but obedient wind, Rachel waited for it to approach.

"...It's here."

A sound was approaching. A phenomena weapon developed during the Dark War and sealed immediately after the end of the war due to its overwhelming power. Gigant: Take-Mikazuchi.

The irradiation... had begun.

At the same time, lightning-like light was born and began to rage around Rachel. With crackling sounds that seemed to scorch the night sky, in its center, Rachel reached out her hand and commanded.

"Zero-type restriction released, dimensional interference imaginary number form deployed... Connecting to the inherent Boundary... 'Tsukuyomi Unit,' activate."

In response to the girl's whispering call, the light surrounding her increased its intensity and raged wildly. The wind was also drawn in and raged, creating a storm zone around Rachel. It was as if a storm was raging only there.

Rachel remained motionless, staring upwards. The moment she perceived the beam of light that shot straight down to the ground, her vision was fixed on it.

At Rachel's gaze, an extraordinarily large magic circle was created in front of her. Its brilliance was equal to the moon that illuminated the night. In its center, the giant's beam, emitted from far away, struck as if being absorbed.

However, the light could only penetrate that far, up to the magic circle that Rachel deployed. The giant's light was blocked by the magic circle and exploded on the spot.

A roar echoed through the night. Light and heat flared up, burning the dark blue sky orange. But only the light scattered. The magic circle that Rachel created absorbed all the heat, the shock, all the power, on the spot.

Eventually, what had risen into the air lost its heat and melted away, and soon the night regained its tranquility. Waiting for the giant's unrefined light to converge easily, Rachel gracefully flicked her fingers and erased the magic circle into the moonlight.

In the night that was regaining its original colors as if nothing had happened, Rachel looked beyond the stars.

At heights that were too far to see from here, the giant who had failed to destroy the target would probably be losing power and returning to his coffin.

"Good night, Gigant: Take-Mikazuchi. You'll have four years to sleep soundly."

Until the next irradiation, the giant must accumulate power. At the earliest, four years. It would take longer if it's late.

That giant's light was a means to forcibly reset the world when it could not repeat for some reason.

But Rachel had just ruined that, too.

With this, the world had truly escaped from the repetition. It had returned to the flow of time that should have been.

"...Such an important destiny, being decided by only a few people. I'm a little envious." Circling in the sky, Rachel looked down at Kagutsuchi and quietly muttered.

Decisions, actions, fate, or coincidence that would change the world. For someone like herself, who could only watch the world's future from the outside, these things would be forever unrelated to her.

"Well then, I have to go pick up those children."

Even if they were contributors who saved the world, leaving them alone together forever would be somewhat irritating.

Suddenly, Rachel's expression lost its composure.

"This presence is..."

She had a bad feeling. That alone was enough for Rachel to hurry. Only when she sensed this presence at this very moment.

"To think that I would..." What a blunder.

Furrowing her narrow, raised eyebrows, Rachel hurriedly flew away with teleportation magic.

6

The wide, inorganic underground facility was now completely silent.

The open cauldron was closed by Ragna, who had slept and somehow managed to move, by operating the machine appropriately. As a result, some of the instruments stopped responding, but in the end, it didn't matter since he was going to destroy this place and leave anyway.

Was there anything else to do? He couldn't come up with anything, and just stared at the closed cauldron for a while.

Hearing the sound of something moving and the sound of a thick jacket slipping off, Ragna turned his head. In front of him, about two people apart, Noel, who had been sleeping against the cold metal wall, was rubbing her eyes with both hands, still looking sleepy.

It must have fallen when she raised her head, which she had been resting behind her back. Ragna's red jacket, which he had offered as a blanket, was crumpled on her lap.

"You finally woke up." Ragna called out to Noel, with his elbows on his raised knees. He was the one who'd set the distance where to sit.

He had carried the girl's sleeping, defenseless face on his shoulder, but it was also strange to be staring at it, so he deliberately stared elsewhere. The girl's hair and breath occasionally brushed against him as she stirred, perhaps instead of rolling over, and he told himself not to react strangely to it and pretended to be calm.

That continued for several minutes, and Ragna gradually felt miserable for paying attention to such a thing, and finally left Noel under the guise of closing the open cauldron.

Even if he could remain calm, what about Noel? If she were to wake up from her slumber and find Ragna's face right next to her...

It probably wasn't a reality she'd want to know, that she fell asleep leaning on the shoulder of a man who just appeared in her moment of need.

(I don't want her to think I'm a pervert either.)

He didn't need such an undeserved accusation.

Turning to Ragna's voice, Noel looked bewildered, alternating her gaze between the jacket on her lap and Ragna.

Ragna put his hand on the wall, lifted his heavy body, and went in front of Noel, snatching the jacket from her hand and putting it back on.

"You're..."

She seemed to be in the middle of trying to understand the situation. As Noel muttered blankly, Ragna handed her a blue hat, which was placed next to her along with the gun and holster, as a replacement for the jacket.

"Do you remember? You beat me up and called me an idiot, and then you fell asleep." He didn't say "on my shoulder." But Noel blushed and, hiding her face with the hat she was handed, apologized.

"I- I'm sorry! I was, well, I was confused- I mean- I'm really sorry for calling the person who saved me an idiot!"

Still hiding her face with the hat, she sat properly on the spot and repeatedly lowered her head as if crouching down.

She seemed to be safe and sound with no serious injuries. Ragna chuckled lightly.

"We were both saved, so you don't have to thank me."

"Oh, good! You're still here, Miss Noel Vermillion!"

Suddenly, the voice of a man Ragna didn't know jumped in.

Ragna turned around as if he had been bounced and gripped the sword he had lowered.

In front of the cauldron, which was now closed and only illuminated by dim lights, a man in a black suit was standing. How long had he been there, and how had he gotten here? Ragna felt a sense of unease due to the man's sudden appearance.

Next to Ragna, who was openly wary and on guard, Noel hurriedly ran in with a flustered look. Without even bothering to gather her hair, she put her hat on her head and straightened her posture.

"Captain Hazama! I'm sorry, I..."

With that one word, Ragna understood.

(From the NOL... but... there's a strange atmosphere.)

A part of him instinctively whispered danger to Ragna. There was a smell of dark schemes from this man.

"Oh, no, no, it's quite alright. I was worried that something might have happened since you hadn't come back in quite a while." The black-suited man, whom Noel called Hazama, put on a light, seemingly frivolous smile around his mouth, but kept his eyes hidden under his hat, and approached with a soothing gesture. With each step he took, the sound of his hard leather shoes echoed up to the ceiling.

When his feet stopped at a position that was still a little far to have a friendly conversation. Hazama removed the hat he was wearing with a flick of his finger and looked at Noel.

"By the way... Noel Vermillion."

The voice he spoke with suddenly changed its tone midway. Ominously, eerily. His narrow eyes, which were stretched out behind his long green hair, flickered. The color of his pupils was gold.

Abandoning his previous polite demeanor, Hazama suddenly pressed his wide hand against his chest with an insolent attitude, and gave Noel a deep smile.

"Look at me. Observe me very carefully with those eyes!"

"What... Hazama-san?" With a puzzled expression as if she didn't understand, Noel tilted her head, looking at Hazama as she was told. But her expression changed immediately.

She seemed to stiffen, and her eyes widened as if she'd seen something terrifying. Her unsteady feet took a step back, but her gaze remained fixed on the man before her, as if forbidden to look away.

"You're different. You're not Hazama-san! A black shadow... Who are you?" Noel asked in a trembling voice. Her eyes, which continued to stare without blinking, had changed to a clear blue before she knew it. In front of her blue gaze, "Hazama" smiled.

"Who am I? Me? I'm... Yuuki Terumi." He uttered a different name.

It was also a name that Ragna remembered. Yuuki Terumi. The name of the shadow that attacked, burned, killed, and plundered the church where Ragna had lived.

"You!" A surge of hatred exploded within him, and Ragna drew his sword and tried to slash at Hazama... no, Terumi.

But before Ragna could move, Noel's lips traced the name that had been spoken, in a daze.

"Yuuki... Terumi..."

The moment the faint voice clearly called out that name, Terumi grinned maliciously with a distorted smile, and at the same time, a whirlwind swirled behind Ragna and Noel.

"No! Noel, you mustn't observe that man!" Rachel, who had teleported there, raised her voice in a rare panic. But by that time, the atmosphere had already changed completely.

"Hyahahahahaha! You recognized me? You finally recognized me, this me? Hihhihihi, that's right, I am 'me'! I've finally regained it, thank you! As expected of the 'Successor of the Azure,' the Calamity Trigger!" Raising his arms to the sky and laughing loudly, Terumi's voice dyed the space with an ominousness that spread far and wide.

Even Ragna, who couldn't grasp the situation, could tell that something bad was happening.

Holding his drawn sword towards Terumi, Raguna stood to protect Noel behind him. Noel, still staring at Terumi, turned pale and hugged her trembling body.

"Hey, get a hold of yourself!"

"What is that? Black... Susano'o..."

"Hey!"

While muttering words, Noel shed tears from the corners of her eyes. Even so, she couldn't take her eyes off him as if she was being forced to. No matter how many times Ragna called her, it was the same.

"Damn it, that bastard!!"

(If that's the case, then it's this way.)

Ragna swung the sword in his hand widely.

"Ragna, stop!" Rachel's voice didn't reach him. He continued running as he was, swinging his sword down at Terumi, who was smiling without even defending himself. But the sword was easily caught by the casually raised arm of a black suit.

"Oh my, you're so stylish, Ragna-chan. How's your right arm doing? Oh, that's right, I cut it off, didn't I? Sorry, sorry, hahahaha!" Terumi laughed, not even flinching at Ragna's sword, which was swung with all his might. Ragna glared at Terumi's gleeful face, his murderous intent growing as he put more weight into the sword.

Terumi's free hand moved slightly. His lips curled into a twisted smile, and he shouted menacingly.

"Since we've reunited... I'll go ahead and tear off your left side too! Ouroboros!" In response to his call, Ragna heard the sound of chains moving from somewhere. The next moment, a chain shaped like a snake's jaw burst out from Hazama's shoulder.

"What?"

The target, as Terumi declared, was Ragna's left arm. But before the snake's head could bite into his flesh, the chain was grabbed by a giant arm that suddenly appeared from the side and was thrown away with brute force.

Both Ragna and Terumi shouted in surprise at the next intruder.

Standing in the middle of the distance they'd created by leaping back, was the giant who threw Terumi, chains and all. He was a tall, muscular figure, easily towering over them. His skin was unnaturally red, and his arm was fitted with a crude device. It was Tager, the cyborg soldier of Sector Seven.

As he turned towards Terumi, the communication line connected to Tager switched open, and the voice from the other side of the communicator, who wasn't there, echoed through the room.

"We finally meet... Yuuki Terumi!" The voice was a low and spirited female voice, its hostility clear even though there was no one there... It belonged to Kokonoe, the researcher of Sector Seven and Tager's creator.

Terumi's expression immediately twisted in disgust.

"That voice... Kokonoe? Tch, you're all coming out in droves, aren't you? Don't you people have anything better to do?"

"Shut up! Now that you've shown yourself, I'll definitely kill you!"

"Hmph, kill me? You? Hah, don't make me laugh! If you can do it, then try it!"

If the woman on the other side of the communicator raised her voice, Terumi would further provoke her as if mocking her.

Meanwhile, Tager calmly took a stance, never rushing in and carefully observing the situation. He stood as a wall between Kokonoe, Ragna, and Terumi.

Rachel, who had lightly kicked off the floor, flew down and landed in front of the red giant. Her crimson eyes stared piercingly straight at Terumi.

"You're in a good mood as soon as you're observed. If you want to play that much, I wouldn't mind being your opponent... 'Boy'."

The smile on her lips was somewhat cruel, carrying something colder than killing intent. The oppressive aura she exuded was disproportionate to her appearance as a young girl, intimidating not only Terumi in front of her but everyone around her.

It was Terumi who decided to leave the pressure first.

"Oh, scary, scary... I can't afford to fail here, now that I've finally fused with the vessel." Chuckling as his thin shoulders shook, Terumi lowered his body and leapt away.

While still low to the ground, he picked up a hat that was lying near Tager's feet, then moved to the lid of the cauldron.

"Kukuku, I don't like it, but I'll go along with your suggestion. Let's not touch each other's pieces and retreat for now. But..."

The chain he released upwards grabbed the void, pulling up the slender figure of Hazama, who called himself Terumi.

"I'll show you a special show soon, so wash your neck and look forward to it, you damn vampire!! Hyahahahahahahahaha!!"

Using the snake's head of the chain as a foothold, Terumi scattered his violent laughter and disappeared from the underground space.

Once his presence was gone, Rachel flicked her dress, dispelling the extraordinary aura she had been exuding. Finally, a proper, non-threatening air returned there.

"Ugh, ah..."

Perhaps due to the release of tension, or perhaps because Terumi had disappeared, Noel's body suddenly lost strength, as if a string had been cut. Just as she was about to collapse, Ragna caught her unsteady body in his arms.

"Whoa... that was close."

"S-sorry..." Her face was pale and the strength in her grip on his arm was weak, barely enough to keep her standing. Even so, Noel finally seemed to be responding normally. For the time being, Ragna was relieved about that.

But soon the next situation approached.

It was as if the rocky mountain that supported Kagutsuchi was trembling, and the surroundings began to shake. The source of the tremor immediately made itself known. Part of the mountain of equipment that was holding the cauldron exploded into flames.

"Whoa!?"

"Kyah!"

As soon as the explosion occurred, an even larger tremor shook the ground beneath Ragna and the others, causing Noel to collapse and sit down.

Ragna took her arm and pulled her up, making her stand. The next explosion, which occurred as if chasing after them, broke the ceiling and caused rubble to fall.

Some of it hit the device, causing another explosion.

"There's a serious malfunction in the cauldron's control system. This was caused by the aftereffects of the rampage here, as well as the severe damage to its machinery. The circuits inside the device are probably all short-circuited. It seems that some of them have exploded."

Tager reported calmly, without any sign of panic despite the situation, listing the results of his visual analysis.

"More importantly, if we stay here, we'll be crushed!" Ragna shouts roughly, slightly irritated by his calmness. He had some idea about the serious malfunction of the machine.

Kokonoe's unpleasant voice emerged from the still open communicator.

"Tager, evacuate."

"Understood. But what about the others? With the current output, I can barely transfer myself." The giant cyborg looked at the other three with concern through his opaque sunglasses.

Rachel gave a sarcastic yet elegant bow to Tager.

"Don't worry, I'm better at teleportation than your master." As soon as she said that, Rachel formed a rose-colored magic circle around herself, including Ragna and Noel. A colorful wind blew from nowhere, scattering the fragrant aroma of roses around them.

"I see. My apologies."

"Don't worry about it... Well then, Kokonoe, I'll be going ahead."

After saying a word to Tager, who pushed up his sunglasses with his rough fingers, and Kokonoe, who was on the other side of the communicator, Rachel waved her hand in the air, adorned with luxurious lace.

Rachel, who was in the center of the magic circle, Noel, who couldn't stand due to the tremors of the explosion, and Ragna, who was holding her up and supporting her.

The three of them teleported away from the collapsing underground, accompanied by the sweet scent of roses.

January 1, 2200 - Dawn

Shortly after the new year began.

The sky was still the color of night, and only a part of the eastern sky had begun to prepare for the morning.

A violent tremor shook the 13th Hierarchical City of Kagutsuchi.

The large-scale explosion that occurred deep underground quickly spread, tearing and shattering various parts of Kagutsuchi, even destroying the city...

And as the night fully gave way to day, and the sun began to rise in the sky, illuminating the surroundings.

Kagutsuchi was exposing its tragically damaged appearance in the first morning of the new year.

News ran through Kagutsuchi that day.

The explosion that suddenly occurred in the middle of the night was the work of the infamous criminal, the most wanted man with the highest bounty in history, the "Grim Reaper" Ragna the Bloodedge, who had attacked the branch of the Novus Orbis Librarium...

Epilogue

In a corner of the middle layer city, destroyed by the explosion of the underground facility, a pile of rubble, collapsed by the blast, crumbled and fell.

As one piece fell, the rubble began to collapse one after another, as if being impacted from the other side, and soon a gap opened up, large enough for a person to pass through.

Then, a human hand covered in a black glove emerged from the gap. Grabbing the edge of the rubble, a man crawled out, dragging his body.

"Cough... cough, ugh... damn, I inhaled dust... ugh..."

The one who came out, hunched over and coughing, was Ragna, his white hair and red jacket stained with dust.

Exhausted, he climbed over the rubble with unsteady steps and set foot in the long-unseen city, breathing roughly.

The light of the morning sun poured down on the area, dazzlingly bright to his eyes, which had been in the dark rubble until then.

"Ugh, damn... that rabbit bitch... if you're going to send me somewhere with teleportation, at least send me to a decent place... Right under the collapsed rubble, she definitely did that on purpose..."

Ragna, who had been thrown out by the teleportation magic, had been dropped onto a building that had collapsed in the explosion.

Fortunately... because he would have died otherwise, the building was buried in waves of rubble and bedrock, but the main framework was solid, and it was not immediately crushed.

However, the mission immediately after the teleportation was quite difficult: digging through the rubble from the inside without knowing the direction, and getting out of an outer shell that would collapse even if he tried to break it down.

And here he was, injured and with another person to carry. As always, that vampire's mischievousness was physically exhausting.

"Hey, are you okay?" Having coughed out most of the dust he had inhaled, Ragna put his beloved sword, which had been used as a pickaxe, beside him and returned to the gap in the rubble.

Reaching into the darkness, he grabbed the wrist of the woman he saw, and pulled her up with a strong tug.

"W-wait, please! Hyaaa!" Having been forcibly pulled out from the inside, Noel - unsure of where to put her feet- slipped and fell spectacularly from the rubble.

"It hurts..."

After bouncing once in the middle, she landed on the ground with her butt. Noel let out a pathetic cry, rubbing her butt as she staggered to her feet.

"You're clumsy."

Noel's eyes filled with tears out of patheticness or pain. Ragna gently grabbed her arm and helped her up. Her steps were unsteady, but still, she somehow managed to stand on her own two feet.

There, finally, Ragna was able to see Noel under the gentle sunlight, not the dim light or the flames of the cauldron. Looking at her again, he couldn't take his eyes off her.

The smooth texture of her golden hair that fell over her slender shoulders, her teary eyes, her small nose, the color of her lips. As she lightly brushed off the dust and dirt from her clothes, the image of his sister flickered in his mind, and her voice grazed his ears.

"Are you alright?" Ragna's mouth naturally asked that question.

Finally realizing that she was being watched, Noel let out an "ah" and hurriedly straightened her back, making a serious expression typical of a soldier.

"I'm fine. Thank you for your concern."

"I see. That's good." He couldn't help but smile at that serious face.

Thinking she was being made fun of, Noel's expression crumbled for a moment as if she had lost confidence. After adjusting it a bit, she once again bowed her head politely to Ragna.

"Thank you so much for helping me so many times. If you hadn't been there, I... "

She would have died, her emotions swaying behind her words told him.

Ragna frowned uncomfortably. He wasn't good in this kind of atmosphere.

"I told you earlier, you helped me too. Let's call it even. I don't want you to owe me anything."

Such things were heavy and troublesome. He also wasn't good at being connected by troublesome ties because of such things.

Unaware of his true feelings, Noel took his reply as one of humility and kindness.

"Um... would it be okay if I used your name?"

"Name? Ah..." Ragna hesitated for a moment. This girl was a soldier of the NOL, after all. Giving his name was not a wise choice. But... he somehow thought that it would be okay with this girl. He decided to answer honestly.

"Ragna the Bloodedge."

The moment she heard that name, Noel's movements stopped completely.

"Eh? Ragna... the... Bloodedge?"

With a questioning expression, she remained frozen, repeating Ragna's name falteringly. Before long, understanding slowly came.

"Ah, you- you are- are you Ragna the Bloodedge?! The vicious criminal, the wanted fugitive!"

"Well, yeah. What about it?"

Only the external features of his white hair and red jacket were incorporated into the wanted poster, which didn't even resemble him that much, so she should have noticed it sooner.

Ragna thought to himself that the soldier in front of him was not only clumsy, but also stupid.

While Ragna scratched his cheek in confusion, Noel pulled out her two handguns, awkwardly aiming them at Ragna.

"P-please be quiet! If you don't run or hide, you have the right to remain silent and the right to a lawyer, and I will arrest you!"

"W-whoa, calm down, you're not making sense!" It was nothing short of incoherent. Surprised by her confusion more than the arrest or the wanted poster, Ragna involuntarily pulled his upper body back. Then, he put his hand to his head with a troubled look. He was at a loss for how to handle her and how to react.

For the time being, he couldn't consider her an excellent soldier, but he could at least tell that she was doing her best. Such a clumsy stance. Of course, Ragna didn't know what that hard work was for.

"Ha... jeez. You should look at the situation before you say anything. I'm battered, and you're battered. How can you arrest me in this state?"

If Ragna ran at full speed with all the power he had now, Noel wouldn't be able to catch up. He was also confident that he could get through the city without being shot by that gun.

Putting aside the ability of this slender female soldier, she didn't seem to have much combat experience. If he was just going to escape, she was an opponent that Ragna could easily manipulate.

"That's..."

Disappointed, Noel withdrew the firmness that she had desperately created from her tone and attitude. Noel didn't think it was something necessary for them now.

Above all, she didn't want to threaten and arrest "Ragna," who was kind as the mysterious premonition had told her, with a gun. But that was something that Noel couldn't convey to Ragna in words.

"So? What's your name?" Ragna asked bluntly, looking at Noel sideways.

The eyes that were directed at Noel were just on the left side. Ragna's green eye reflected in Noel's green eyes.

Suppressing some kind of feeling that welled up, Noel clasped her hands in front of her chest. While staring back at Ragna's left eye, she replied.

"Noel... Noel Vermillion."

Neither Noel nor Ragna noticed that what she had told him was not her name and rank as an NOL soldier, but her name as a girl.

The sunlight that reached here, unfiltered by the upper layers, was soft and gentle.

While warming their cheeks with the temperature of the sunlight, Ragna and Noel finally learned each other's names at this time.

The 3rd Hierarchical City of Iwasu

In a certain office of the NOL branch on its highest floor, a woman entered.

Her dignified demeanor could be seen in some places, and it made her feel that she had been raised well.

The color of her uniform's poncho was white. Her beautiful crimson camellia red hair, which flowed down her back, was beautiful. The hat, which had a unique color and was on her head, was also white, the same color as the poncho.

"Lieutenant Tsubaki Yayoi, I have arrived." Her line, spoken with a dignified posture, was directed at a man leaning against the desk in the office.

He was not wearing the NOL uniform, but a black suit and a black hat. He was a slender man, and green hair could be seen peeking out from under the hat, which hid his eyes. The green-haired man remained in his relaxed posture, and moved his lips, a deep smile on his face.

"Ah, thank you for your hard work. I'm sorry to have called you here, but actually, I have a top-secret imperial order for you."

"An imperial order... for me?" Tsubaki widened her eyes slightly in surprise and frowned.

An imperial order was a direct command from the Novus Orbis Librarium's integrated headquarters... in other words, a direct order from the 'Imperator', the head of the NOL.

"Yes, of course, it's genuine. Would you like to check the documents? I have the Imperator's signature." Seeing Tsubaki's suspicious expression, the man asked, somewhat mockingly. It was a tone that seemed to be testing her inner thoughts.

"No, it's not necessary. May I ask about the details of the mission?"

"Oh, is that so? Well, about the details of the mission... it's a top-secret mission, you see. I'll tell you the details verbally. But don't worry, it's a very, very simple mission."

With a weightless tone and attitude, the man, still leaning against the desk, told Tsubaki the details of the imperial order.

The contents made Tsubaki's expression stiff. It didn't immediately register in her mind.

That's how shocking the assigned mission was to her.

The direct order from the Imperator, which the man in the black suit told Tsubaki... that order, which she could never disobey as one who swore loyalty to the NOL...

"Lieutenant Tsubaki Yayoi, of the Zero Squadron. I order you... to assassinate the traitors, Major Jin Kisaragi and Lieutenant Noel Vermillion."

The destination was the 13th Hierarchical City of Kagutsuchi. The departure date was soon.

Afterword

Thank you for picking up this book, "BLAZBLUE CALAMITY TRIGGER"! I am the author, Mako Komao.

"BLAZBLUE," as the title suggests, is a 2D fighting game released by Arc System Works Co., Ltd. This is a novelization of that game, and specifically, it is the second volume of "CALAMITY TRIGGER."

If you happened to pick this up because you were drawn to the beautiful cover, I would be happy if you could also enjoy the first volume!

Also, the latest installment in the original 2D fighting game "BLAZBLUE" series, "CHRONOPHANTASMA," is currently very popular in arcades as of this writing, so if you are interested in the work, I think you will find a fun future if you take the opportunity to play it! I personally like the new character, Amane!

Furthermore, I would be happy if you could also check out the other novelized series of "BLAZBLUE" that have already been released!

Now then, to those who have been with me since the first volume, I suppose I should say, "Thank you for waiting." I somehow managed to write the afterword for the second volume, and now I am simply feeling somewhat dazed, or rather, I am in a state of disbelief at this open future.

I think I have said this in an afterword somewhere before, but I thought it would never end!

Has it safely arrived in your hands? I suppose that since you are reading this, it must have a wonderful cover, a beautiful color opening, illustrations, and be in the form of a novel published by Fujimi Dragon Book.

But of course, when I am writing the afterword, the book has not yet been published, so I am still nervous! I wonder if something will happen, and I imagine all sorts of bad things. I am the type of person who worries about whether I locked the door after I leave!

Since there is nothing I can do by just fantasizing, let's assume that the book has been safely published. How was it? This novelized version of "BLAZBLUE CALAMITY TRIGGER."

It is structured in two volumes, and this is the form in which it was delivered to you, but I wrote it with the hope that you would find many enjoyable parts within it.

In the first and second volumes, I tried to create scenes that correspond to each other. They are hidden in small places as well, so I hope you will enjoy those as well.

Also, in the second volume, the heroine finally appeared! I was filled with the feeling of "I finally got to write her!" It was the first time for me to write her in a novel, so I was excited.

However, although I had been looking forward to it since the first volume, when I actually started writing, she was an incredibly delicate character, and she became a character whose emotional expression I had to pay more attention to than ever before... I am worried about how she appears in your eyes. It's like sending my daughter off to elementary school or something.

The game itself, "BLAZBLUE CALAMITY TRIGGER," is very deep, and it's truly a story that makes you wonder if it's really a fighting game, and the story is prepared for each character, so this book does not cover everything in "CT." I think there will be various criticisms and so on.

But anyway, if these two volumes, as the main story of "CT," were enjoyable for you, then there is nothing more I could ask for!

I have written "BLAZBLUE" in various forms for quite some time now, and this time as well... I was happy. There were quite a few difficult things, but when it was over, I felt that I had been allowed to write such a wonderful book.

"BLAZBLUE" is great, isn't it? Somehow, the more I write about it, the more I like it. But the more I write about it, the more pressure I feel. Because the things I write become history. But if I could have my way... I would like to write more history. I really mean it.

Well, well, well. If I try to avoid spoilers, I will end up not being able to say anything about the content, so please allow me to list some thank yous... or rather, apologies, as usual, to the people who helped me.

To my editor... thank you very much. I have run out of words of apology and that's all I can say, but I was truly, truly indebted to you. Thanks to you, I am alive. Thank you.

To Sugiyama-sama, who drew the cover, the opening illustrations, and the illustrations, I am truly sorry for the trouble this time... I don't know how to apologize... It was a difficult time for you, and yet you gave me the illustrations for the manuscript that was not easily completed. Thank you so much!

And of course, to Producer Mori-sama. Thank you for your many advices from the plot stage. I am sorry for suddenly calling you and only asking about the setting of the Hierarchical City and hanging up. I am sorry for being slow. But thank you for letting me write "CT." I am truly honored to have become a writer.

Finally, in the usual order, to you who read this book. Thank you so much. I am truly happy to be able to conclude the second volume and say hello to you like this, and how should I say it, thank you again for letting me write "BLAZBLUE" like this.

I hope to see you again next time, under the same title.

Goodbye then! When all the manuscript work is finished, I will practice Amane!

Mako Komao

こんにちは、アークシステムワークスの杉山です。
カラミティトリガーを開発していた頃を思い出し
懐かしい気持ちになりながら絵を描かせていただきました。
ヒャッハーテルミも久し振りに描けて楽しかったです。

今後ともBLAZBLUEシリーズを
よろしくお願いいたします！

杉山

駒尾先生、
編集様、デザイナー様、
森P
お疲れ様でした！

"Komao-sensei,

To the editor, designer, and Mori-P,

Thank you for your hard work!

Hello, this is Sugiyama from Arc System Works. I was drawing the illustrations while reminiscing about the time when we were developing Calamity Trigger, and it brought back nostalgic feelings.

I also enjoyed drawing Yuuki Terumi after a long time. We look forward to your continued support of the BLAZBLUE series!"

またまたまたまたまたこんにちはアークシステムワークスの森です。
先ずは本書を読んで頂いた読者様に感謝申し上げます。
並びに、駒尾先生、杉山さん、富士見書房担当者様に深く御礼を申し上げます。
さて、ブレイブルーの小説もカラミティートリガー編が終了いたしました。
そして世界は「確率事象・コンティニュアムシフト」へと変化していきます。
・・・つか出るんですかね？・・・出せると良いなぁ・・・
多分出るでしょう・・・多分！！
そして、本書が出たころには面白い発表がなされていると思いますが、
皆様、そちらの方もご期待頂けると嬉しいです！
まだまだ「蒼」の物語は続きます。
出来れば、「フェイズ」シリーズのように、本編では語られていない、
お話も皆様に披露できればと・・・妄想しております！・・・
いいじゃん！妄想するのはタダだよ！！
では、皆様またお会い出来る時を楽しみにお待ちしています。

Hello again, it's Mori from Arc System Works.

First of all, I would like to express my gratitude to the readers who have read this book. And I would also like to deeply thank Komao-sensei, Sugiyama-san, and the Fujimi Shobo staff.

Now, the novelization of Blazblue's Calamity Trigger arc has come to an end.

And the world will change to "Probability Event - Continuum Shift."

...I wonder if it will come out?... It would be nice if it could come out... It will probably come out... probably!!

And I think there will be an interesting announcement around the time this book comes out, and I would be happy if you could look forward to that as well!

Also, the "Azure" goods will continue.

If possible, I have a delusion that I would like to show you stories that are not told in the main story, like the "Phase" series!... It's okay! It's free to have delusions!!

Well then, I look forward to the time when we can meet again.